

Hong Kong's chief executive launches phony dialogue platform

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As Hong Kong's protests continues in its 16th week, Chief Executive Carrie Lam is attempting to shut down the movement over the lack of democratic and social rights. This Thursday, she is set to hold the first of what her administration is calling public dialogue platforms. The platform has already been met with widespread criticisms.

Thursday's session will be held in the Queen Elizabeth Stadium in Wan Chai, from 7pm to 9pm. The government reported that more than 20,000 people registered to attend. While the venue is capable of holding 3,500 people, only 150 participants, supposedly chosen at random, will be allowed entrance. Two more proposed dialogue sessions will be by invite only.

Last week, the government claimed, "The session will be an open dialogue platform aimed at reaching out to the public, and invites people from all walks of life to express their views to the government, so as to fathom the discontent in society and look for solutions." Lam also claimed that the issues her government would supposedly address include social problems such as the lack of safe and affordable housing.

In acknowledging that there is more to the protests than the current set of demands, Lam is making an empty appeal to the protesters while also trying to undercut the pan-democrats and official opposition in Hong Kong. They are just as responsible for the dramatic social inequality in the city as the pro-Beijing officials in power.

Many protesters have rejected Lam's appeal. One commenter wrote in an online forum regarding event registration, "It is silly to leave your name and information for the government to monitor you and retaliate. Let the pro-government camp take part in this PR stunt." Others stated that they had already made

clear their demands through demonstrations, thus making the dialogue session pointless.

Seeking to curry favor with protesters, Tanya Chan, of the Civic Party and a part of the opposition pan-democrat grouping, criticized the meeting as little more than theater, with participants at most being given only 48 seconds to speak.

Yet, none of the pan-democrats has offered a genuine alternative, many of them having disappeared from the protests over the past few weeks. Their intervention now is a cynical attempt to win support in order to negotiate with the government and ultimately sell out the protest movement.

The pan-democrat and pro-government sides are, however, looking to make a deal. The Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), one of the main protest organizers aligned with the pan-democrats, last month left the door open for such a bargain. The CHRF argued that for the opposition to accept any government olive branch—which would only be at the expense of workers and youth—they would need "something substantial," in order to sell to the disenfranchised public.

Currently, Lam has offered no concessions except to formally withdraw the controversial extradition bill that initially sparked the protests in June. Other protest demands include an independent inquiry into police violence, amnesty for the more than 1,500 demonstrators who have been arrested, Lam's resignation, and direct election of the city's leaders based on universal suffrage.

Furthermore, the two political groupings are wary of appearing too close to Lam. The chief executive spoke with Hong Kong's district councillors on September 18, in a meeting similarly dressed up as a dialogue session. Only 98 councillors out of a total 458 attended. In rejecting attendance at the meeting, Lo Kin-hei, vice-

chairman of the Democratic Party said, “The demands of the public are crystal clear. It is pointless going.” Even pro-government councillors stayed away, fearing the impact it would have on upcoming district elections in November.

In focusing on the main demands, the pan-democrats are attempting to draw attention away from the broader social issues. Ivan Choy Chi-keung, a prominent lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, stated, “I bet she hopes attendees will touch on livelihood issues such as housing, but these are not the root cause of the crisis.”

Yet early in the movement this summer, protesters indicated that their lack of access to affordable housing, decent paying jobs, and good working conditions was a driving factor in their decision to protest in a city where social inequality is at its highest level in 45 years.

At the beginning of August and then again at the beginning of September, tens of thousands of workers went on strike, demonstrating that there are far deeper political, economic, and social issues at work. It is this fact that terrifies the bourgeoisie, regardless of their own factional conflicts, driving them to reach some sort of accord.

At the same time, the economy is faltering. The Hong Kong Trade Development Council on Monday revised its figures for the year, predicting that exports would fall by 4 percent, the worst figure since the global financial crisis in 2009. The drop has been brought on by both the protests and the ongoing trade war between the United States and China, with demand from the mainland falling sharply.

A business survey released at the beginning of September reported “the steepest deterioration in the health of the private sector since February 2009.” It stated that according to IHS Markit Hong Kong’s purchasing managers’ index, business activity fell from 43.8 to 40.8 from July to August. A figure below 50 shows economic contraction.

Last week, Moody’s credit rating agency also downgraded Hong Kong’s credit outlook from stable to negative. Fitch Rating’s earlier this month downgraded the city’s rating to “AA” from “AA+”. Tourism, a major component of Hong Kong’s economy, also fell by 40 percent in August compared to the previous year, the largest decline since May 2003.

Workers and youth should place no faith in any

section of the bourgeoisie to address their legitimate demands for democratic and social rights. Appeals to the major powers such as US and British imperialism will only derail the movement by subordinating to the interests of these powers. The fight for genuine democratic rights will only go forward with a turn to the working class throughout China, including Hong Kong, and internationally as part of the struggle for socialism.



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