

The lessons of the Hong Kong protests for the working class

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For almost six months, demonstrations ranging into the millions have taken place in Hong Kong to demand basic democratic rights and oppose police brutality. However, the protest movement has reached an impasse: the Hong Kong administration has made no significant concessions to the demands of the protesters and is escalating police repression, while the militant tactics of layers of students have only led to their isolation.

Underlying these mass protests lie widespread concerns about the anti-democratic methods of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in Beijing and its political stooges in the Hong Kong administration, as well as the deteriorating economic and social conditions facing workers and youth.

However, in the absence of a turn to a revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective and to the working class in Hong Kong and throughout China, the protest movement is being corralled behind various pro-capitalist parties and organisations, including those that are openly right wing, anti-communist and pro-imperialist.

The political dangers were revealed in the district elections in Hong Kong on Sunday, which resulted in an overwhelming win for the so-called pan-democrat grouping that forms the city's conservative political opposition. The pan-democrats as a result of their record of timidity and subservience to the pro-Beijing administration had alienated many people, particularly the youth, and were largely sidelined in the protests.

Yet, in the absence of a political alternative, these parties were the beneficiaries of the widespread hostility to Beijing as voters cast a protest ballot against its anti-democratic methods and police violence in Hong Kong. Overall the pan-democrats won 347 of the 452 district council seats and now control 17 out of 18 of the councils—a sharp rebuff to the pro-Beijing parties which dominated all the councils prior to the election.

The Democratic Party and Civic Party—the largest components of the pan-democratic grouping—are both pro-capitalist, representing layers of the Hong Kong elites that are concerned about Beijing's encroachment on their business interests. They are hostile to any movement of the working class and look to Washington and London to place pressure on the Chinese regime to protect their position.

The distrust among young people for the pan-democrats was

already evident in the mass protests that erupted in 2012 against attempts by Beijing to impose a patriotic education curriculum, and again in 2014 in the so-called umbrella movement demanding free and open elections for the territory's top post of chief executive. In 2014, while the pan-democrats manoeuvred in the Legislative Council for minor concessions, masses of young people took to the streets and refused to be intimidated by police tear gas and violence.

The "umbrella" protests spawned various groups and parties—a number of which, including Demosist?, Hong Kong Indigenous and the Hong Kong National Front, based themselves on a so-called "localist" perspective of Hong Kong parochialism and advocated greater autonomy or complete independence from Beijing. The most rabid and anti-communist "localists," such as Hong Kong Indigenous and Civic Passion, engaged in provocative and sometimes violent attacks on mainland Chinese, accusing them of driving up prices and blocking job and education opportunities for "locals."

The latest protest movement erupted in early June over attempts by the Hong Kong administration to ram through legislation to permit extradition to mainland China. It was widely feared that this would be exploited by Beijing to seize or intimidate critics and opponents. The organizer of the largest protests has been the conservative Civil Human Rights Front—a grouping of some 48 NGOs, several pan-democrat parties and other political groups, student organisations and trade unions, including the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions.

The Civil Human Rights Front has formulated the demands of the protests—the withdrawal of the extradition law, an independent investigation into police violence, the dropping of charges against protesters and free and open elections based on full suffrage. The limited character of these demands reflects the bourgeois class character of the organization, which represents layers of the business elite hostile to Beijing's growing intrusion and fearful, above all, that the protests could trigger a mass movement of the working class. The Front has deliberately not advanced any demands to address the worsening social crisis facing workers and young people.

The role of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) was graphically exposed when actions by various

groups of workers coalesced into city-wide general strikes involving hundreds of thousands on August 5 and again on September 2-3. In an effort to confine industrial action, the HKCTU did not call on its constituent unions to strike, but left it up to individual members to call in sick or not attend work. Its speakers echoed the demands of the Civil Human Rights Front and made no reference to the social grievances of workers.

In the wake of the September strike, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that she would formally withdraw the extradition legislation in October—a step that was widely denounced as being too little, too late. At the same time, in reaction to the emergence of the working class, the conservative and localist opposition sought to divert the protest movement in a right-wing direction by making appeals to US and British imperialism to intervene.

A march was organized on September 8 to the US consulate, accompanied by the waving of American flags and the singing of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” followed by a similar protest outside the British consulate. Joshua Wong, the young leader of Demosist?, toured Europe and the US, where he was lauded in the media, given access to prominent political leaders and allowed to address the US Congress.

The open turn to Washington and London plays directly into the hands of the CCP regime, which from the outset has sought to malign the protests as the work of a handful of pro-imperialist agitators operating at the behest of Washington. Beijing will undoubtedly exploit allegations of foreign interference to justify any military crackdown as well as to poison public opinion in the mainland against the Hong Kong protests. While the millions who joined the protests were not animated by pro-American flag-waving, the danger is that the protest movement, without a clear political alternative, will be steered in that direction.

US imperialism has not the slightest concern for democratic rights in Hong Kong, or anywhere else in the world, for that matter. It has a long history of selectively using “human rights” as a pretext for regime-change operations and neo-colonial wars in order to advance its own predatory economic and strategic interests. Washington’s hypocritical campaign over Chinese repression of the Uighurs in the western province of Xinjiang is part of its strategy for weakening and subordinating China, which it regards as the chief threat to US global dominance.

Sections of the US political, intelligence and security establishment are clearly moving to exploit the “human rights” issue in Hong Kong. The US Congress passed legislation this week mandating an annual review of Hong Kong’s autonomy to ascertain whether it should retain special trading relations, as well as sanctioning individuals responsible for torturing activists. While Trump as recently as last month praised China’s response to the Hong Kong protests, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo struck a somewhat different note this week,

calling on the Hong Kong administration to address the concerns of the protest movement.

Appeals to imperialism to defend democratic rights are not only futile. They are a dangerous trap. If the struggle for democratic rights in Hong Kong is not to end in defeat or disaster, young people and workers need to turn to the working class, not to Washington and London, in the first instance throughout China. Like workers and youth in Hong Kong, the working class on the Chinese mainland confront deteriorating living standards, oppressive working conditions and a lack of basic democratic rights.

An appeal for support should directed to workers around the world amid the resurgence of the class struggle, including striking auto workers in the US, the Yellow Vest movement in France and protest movements in Chile, Ecuador and Lebanon. What is needed is a unified struggle based on a socialist and internationalist perspective against the capitalist system and all of its defenders in Beijing, Washington, London and around the world.

To unite workers, it is essential to oppose all forms of nationalism and chauvinism—both reactionary Chinese patriotism and the equally reactionary Hong Kong “localism” and parochialism, which scapegoats “mainlanders” for the social crisis generated by capitalism.

The fight for socialism requires the political clarification of the role of Stalinism and Maoism. While the 1949 Chinese Revolution was a momentous historic event that ended imperialist domination of China and raised the living standards of the masses, it was deformed from the outset by the Chinese Communist Party regime headed by Mao Zedong. The nationalist perspective of Maoism proved to be a disaster for the deformed workers’ state, but the conclusion drawn by the CCP was to turn to capitalist restoration from 1978 onwards, which rapidly accelerated after the violent suppression of workers and students in the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989.

The struggle to unite workers and youth throughout China, including Hong Kong, in the fight for socialism necessitates the building of a revolutionary leadership steeped in the lessons of the strategic experiences of the working class in the 20th century. The International Committee of the Fourth International—the world Trotskyist movement—is the only party that has waged a consistent struggle against Stalinism and all forms of opportunism. We urge workers and students in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland to contact us and to begin a discussion of these critical political issues and to work towards the building of a section of the ICFI in China.



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