

One million march in Hong Kong on New Year's Day

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On January 1, Hong Kong residents took part in the largest protest rally and march held in weeks. According to organizers, approximately one million demonstrators participated, or around one-seventh the population of the city.

The annually-held New Year's Day rally was sponsored by the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), a collection of political groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that orbit the pan-Democrats, the official political opposition in Hong Kong. While some protests have taken place in recent weeks, including 800,000 people on December 8, there were fewer and less intense protests in the city following November's district elections that resulted in a large victory for the pan-democrats.

Wednesday's rally began at Victoria Park and included a march to the central business district. It was initially sanctioned before the authorities abruptly shut it down. Participants were set upon by police and shot with tear gas and pepper spray, leading to broader confrontations.

Ng Lok-chun, a senior superintendent, justified police actions with claims some protesters had "hijacked the procession" after they "threw a petrol bomb at an officer." Around 400 people were arrested.

During the rally, protesters continued to press for their five key demands. These include an independent inquiry into police violence, complete amnesty for arrested demonstrators, a stop to labelling demonstrators as rioters, fully democratic elections, and the full repeal of the extradition bill that provided the immediate impetus for the protests in June last year. While Lam previously agreed to withdraw the bill, this has not mollified protesters who chanted during the march, "Five demands, not one less." A call also went out for people to join labor unions.

Some demonstrators smashed windows and damaged ATM machines at a branch of the HSBC bank in retaliation for the freezing of \$HK 70 million (\$US9 million) in funds that had been raised to support arrested protesters' legal defences and other needs. Police, in an effort to discredit the legitimate demands for democratic rights, have accused the crowd-funding platform Spark Alliance of money laundering and paying young people to join in demonstrations. Police arrested four people in relation to the charges on December 19.

A witness to the January 1 demonstrations, Kan Cheng, told the media that plainclothes police used the incident at HSBC to attack marchers. "I saw a protester being beaten and she hadn't done anything at all," Cheng stated. "She hadn't vandalized at all."

The previous day, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam attempted to appeal to people's desires for improved economic and social conditions. She stated: "We must handle the problems at hand and acknowledge the shortcomings in our systems as well as the deep-rooted problems and conflicts that have been accumulating for many years in our society."

These words are entirely empty, as neither Lam, nor any faction of the ruling elite, has the desire or capability to resolve social inequality in the city that is caused by capitalism.

The protests have reached a crossroad. To develop a genuine struggle for democratic rights in Hong Kong, workers, students and young people must break the bonds that have been placed on the movement by various factions of the capitalist class.

The struggle in Hong Kong is part of the movement of strikes and protests that have erupted across the globe—in France, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, and the United States—against attacks on democratic rights and on

living conditions of working people.

Hong Kong workers and youth must reach out to their counterparts internationally, including the massive working class in mainland China. They must reject the right-wing and reactionary calls for United States or British imperialism to “liberate” Hong Kong, and related attempts by localist groups to drive a wedge between workers in the city and the rest of China. Workers everywhere, regardless of borders, face the same exploitation at the hands of the capitalist classes. The fight therefore is one against capitalism and the nation-state system and for international socialism.

In this struggle, workers will need new organizations to link their workplace struggles with the demands for democratic rights.

According to the CHRF, more than 40 new unions have been established in recent weeks, supposedly to offer organizational support to workers in the protest movement. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), which is allied with the pan-democrats, is offering aid in establishing these new unions, according to veteran HKCTU member Mung Siu-tat. However, the HKCTU is actively working to prevent a large-scale general strike from taking place, even as tens of thousands of workers over the summer have indicated they are prepared to walk off the job after taking part in one-day strikes in August and September.

A December 26 article in the *South China Morning Post* further highlighted the role the unions are playing as a brake on the working class. Stanley Tsang, vice-chairman of the newly formed Hong Kong Hotel Employees Union told the *Post* that a strike was not currently being planned, claiming more preparation was necessary. Tsang disparaged the role of the tens of thousands who took part in this summer’s strikes, claiming they were forced to participate because of traffic disruptions.

Hong Kong workers must take warning: the HKCTU will attempt to shut down the protest movement, not expand it in the interests of the social and democratic demands of the working class.



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