

Hong Kong police close largest opposition newspaper

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Facing anti-democratic pressure from the government, Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* newspaper announced that it would cease publication as of June 24. The paper cited staff safety for the closure, following the arrest of the chief editor and other executives. The paper's assets were also frozen, making continued operations largely impossible.

Around 500 police officers raided *Apple Daily*'s offices on June 17, while arresting Ryan Law, the chief editor, and four others. These included Cheung Kim-hung, the CEO of Next Digital, the parent company that owned the paper. The police also froze \$HK18 million (\$US2.3 million) in assets owned by companies with links to the paper. These were Apple Daily Limited, Apple Daily Printing Limited, and AD Internet Limited.

Arrests are ongoing. Fung Wai-kong, an editor and columnist with the paper, was detained Sunday night at the Hong Kong airport, reportedly attempting to board a flight to the United Kingdom. He is the seventh person affiliated with the paper to be arrested. In addition, on June 30, Reuters reported that Next Digital would end operations the following day, after its assets were frozen.

Hong Kong police have accused *Apple Daily* of violating the draconian national security law, which went into effect in June 2020, by publishing more than 30 articles since 2019 calling for other countries, namely the United States and the UK, to impose sanctions on the city and on China, in relation to the pro-democracy protests that erupted in 2019. The government accused the paper of "collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security."

In Washington, the Biden administration issued a statement on the paper's closure filled with

hypocritical moralizing. It stated, "Through arrests, threats, and forcing through a National Security Law that penalizes free speech, Beijing has insisted on wielding its power to suppress independent media and silence dissenting views." It continued, "Journalists are truth-tellers who hold leaders accountable and keep information flowing freely—and that is needed now more than ever in Hong Kong, and in places around the world where democracy is under threat."

This is coming from the same government that continues to press charges against journalist Julian Assange, who remains locked in Britain's Belmarsh Prison for exposing US war crimes. The Democrats and Republicans have also waged attacks on free speech on platforms like Facebook and Google, seeking to silence left-wing and anti-war voices online.

The Hong Kong office of China's Foreign Ministry released a statement criticizing Washington. "The national security law... enshrines principles of rule of law including safeguarding human rights, addresses the most pressing and prominent risks facing national security in Hong Kong," it stated. "Press freedom should not be exploited as an excuse for criminal activities, still less a fig leaf for acts to destabilize Hong Kong and China at large."

Apple Daily was the largest newspaper associated with the pan-democrat bloc in Hong Kong. The paper first began publishing in 1995 and was owned by its founder, billionaire Jimmy Lai. Lai is hailed by the pan-democrat bloc and the Western bourgeois media as a defender of democratic rights in Hong Kong. He is currently incarcerated on a string of charges, and faces 20 months in prison following his latest sentencing in May.

Rather than being a voice for democracy, Jimmy Lai enjoys close connections with the US government. His

long-time assistant, Mark Simon, a former US Navy intelligence officer with close links to the CIA, helped Lai secure meetings with leading officials in the previous Trump administration, like Mike Pompeo and Mike Pence. Lai also met with Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, in October 2019.

The *Washington Post*, one of the chief mouthpieces for the Democratic Party, published an opinion piece by Simon on June 25, lambasting Beijing. While paying lip service to freedom of the press, Simon revealed the real interests of this section of the Hong Kong ruling elite that he and Lai represent. He wrote, “Jimmy Lai often told us, ‘No free press, no free market.’ Those in the international business community who believe the closure of *Apple Daily* will have no impact on them are about to learn this lesson the hard way.”

He continued: “Businesses (on the mainland) are assumed to do what China wants, whether that means turning over technology or personal data. This makes the scrutiny and exposure provided by a free press all the more important to keeping Hong Kong a free and open financial market.” In other words, the concern driving Lai and his ilk is not democratic rights for the Hong Kong population, but the impact Beijing’s actions will have on their profit margins.

In this sense, US attacks on Beijing over *Apple Daily* have nothing to do with press freedom or democratic rights in Hong Kong. They are part of a coordinated campaign that includes false claims of genocide in Xinjiang, promotion of the lie that COVID-19 was leaked from a lab in Wuhan, and the ratcheting up of pressure over Taiwan. It is aimed at poisoning public opinion towards China at home, in order to justify war.

At the same time, Beijing is not concerned primarily with the likes of Jimmy Lai and others within the pan-democrat bloc. The government’s attack on freedom of the press is ultimately aimed at the working class. Beijing fears that any expressions of discontent will resonate with workers throughout China, where they face poverty, low wages, and lack of access to safe and affordable housing. One-fifth of people in Hong Kong live below the official poverty line. Approximately 200,000 people in the city are forced to live in tiny, subdivided apartments, known as “coffin homes.”

Indicative of the housing crisis throughout China, in mid-June, police in Shanghai discovered that 39 workers were crammed into a three-bedroom

apartment, with an original rental price of 13,000 yuan (\$US2,000) per month. The workers, mostly employed by nearby restaurants, were paying 700 yuan (\$US108) per bed.

The minimum wage in Shanghai, rising to 2,590 yuan (\$US400) a month on July 1, does not come close to the cost of renting an average 90 square-meter apartment. In the first quarter of this year, the average rental price per square meter of an apartment in the city cost 90 yuan (US\$14), a 14 percent increase over the previous quarter.

Under these volatile conditions, Beijing is attempting to silence any opposition voices, in order to prevent a larger explosion of working-class anger and the emergence of an independent movement for genuine socialism.



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