



Hong Kong: "Occupy 2.0" forces government retreat, for now

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Yesterday, for the second time this week, the Central district of Hong Kong was brought to a standstill by huge demonstrations. On Sunday, some 1 million, approximately one-third of the entire adult population, marched in protest against a proposed new law which will allow Beijing to extradite anyone from the territory of Hong Kong. Yesterday, tens of thousands did more than protest, they fought to prevent the Legislative Council, Legco, as it is known, adopting that law. In the short term, they were successful. Legco had to cancel its meeting and, at the very least, suspend any discussion of the Bill for the rest of this week.

The scenes were very reminiscent of the "Occupy" movement of 2014, when Central was occupied for some three whole months in opposition to a proposed, highly undemocratic, electoral law. The occupation itself was an unplanned, spontaneous response to the government's heavy handed attempt to prevent a demonstration reaching the Legco building. Eventually, faced with the unexpected scale of support for the protests, the government was obliged to stand back and wait for the occupation to slowly peter out, weakened by its lack of a strategy to go forward and force the abandonment of the law.

This time, "Occupy 2.0", as it is already becoming known, has even broader support and a much more hardened approach to its task. It is not only the more politicised younger generation that understands the implications of the law. Business people and journalists are well aware that they, too, could be targeted; practically all business dealings on the mainland involve a degree of bribery and reporting accurately on mainland developments could fall foul of Beijing's news management. With the passage of the proposed law, many businesses would be open to blackmail while journalists will find it difficult to avoid the most effective form of censorship, self-censorship, if they want to pursue their careers.

Vanguard

That explains why many businesses, educational institutions and the Hong Kong Federation of Trades Unions have backed the protests, but there is no doubt at all that the front ranks of the protesters, quite literally the vanguard, have been the students. No doubt either that they have learnt from Occupy 1.0; as the TV reports have shown, they came prepared for the tear gas and pepper spray and had support teams for the frontlines organised through encrypted messaging apps. It was they who forced the government to back down.

All the same, in the longer run, an armed, disciplined and ruthless police force will always be able to force back even a huge crowd of demonstrators armed only with umbrellas, plastic goggles and their own determination. The eventual dispersal of Wednesday's demonstration underlines the need for a greater force than crowds of people.

Hong Kong remains an important economic asset for Beijing; it is no longer a manufacturing centre but its huge container port, its financial services industry and its international airport play a very important role and the whole territory depends on the smooth running of the Mass Transit Railway. Of course, all of them could be disrupted to some extent by demonstrations but strikes by the workers who run them could paralyse them all within hours. That is why it is to Hong Kong's workers and their trades unions that the youthful leaders of the campaign to stop the extradition law should turn.

As well as calling for the trade union leaders to back up their declarations of support with action to stop the government's plans, activists should also go direct to the workplaces and the housing estates, issue leaflets and hold meetings to mobilise workers against the law and, indeed, the whole undemocratic system headed by Beijing's puppet, Carrie Lam.

Independence ?

In the aftermath of Occupy 1.0, the apparently most radical wing of the movement drew the conclusion that the rights of Hong Kong's citizens would never be recognised by Beijing and that, therefore, they could only be guaranteed by the territory becoming an independent state. Supporters of this programme point to Singapore as evidence that such a small territory could, nonetheless, be perfectly viable.

Radical as it might sound, such a programme actually plays straight into Beijing's hands, allowing Xi Jinping and the, misnamed, Communist Party of China to condemn the protesters as simply agents of the foreign powers who did so much damage to China over the last 150 years and are even now trying to wreck its new found prosperity in a trade war. Hong Kong's relative prosperity and democratic norms, like Singapore's, are a by-product of a particular balance of international forces after the Second World War, not of the evolution of separate peoples into nation states. Some of the protesters outside Legco wore T-shirts declaring they were "not Chinese" but that is not what most of Hong Kong's 7 million think and such a slogan only counterposes the protesters to the majority. Even more importantly, it counterposes them to the 1.3 billion in "mainland" China.

Xi Jinping is not scared of Hong Kongers now having the democratic rights that they were denied by the British until the very end of colonial rule. What does scare him is the possibility of those 1.3 billion demanding similar rights, which would be fatal to the one-party dictatorship on which his regime rests. News from Hong Kong is, of course, censored on the mainland but, nonetheless, the people of nearby mega-cities like Shenzhen, Dongguan and Guangzhou soon get to know what is happening just over the border. Examples of Hong Kong workers striking for political rights, and demanding the same rights for their compatriots over the border, would open up a prospect and a political way forward that the fantasy of independence could never inspire.

Nearly a century ago, Chinese revolutionaries, fighting to expel the imperialist powers and reunite their country, took advantage of the relative safety of the International Settlement in Shanghai as a base from which to organise their activity in the rest of the country. Today, Hong Kong can play a similar role for revolutionaries who recognise that the destiny of their city cannot be separated from that of the mainland but, far from being a threat, that is its greatest potential advantage.

Just over the border is the biggest working class the world has ever seen, it is denied its rights but it is increasingly combative. In the context of rivalry between all the imperialist powers, of which China is now one, political and economic instability are sure to promote working class struggles and solidarity across borders will be vitally important. The struggle to defend democratic rights in Hong Kong should not be a reason to turn away from the mainland working class but, on the contrary, to turn towards it, both sides of the border the old communist slogan holds true: The main enemy is at home!

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