

Hong Kong: An important concession, what comes next?

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On September 4, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, finally agreed to withdraw the hated Extradition Bill altogether, and not just leave it on the shelf. If the Bill had become law it would have allowed extradition of anybody on Hong Kong territory for trial on the mainland. Although presented as simply a measure to prevent criminals taking refuge in Hong Kong, it could also have been used against journalists and political dissidents and, indeed, almost anyone doing business on the mainland, where corruption is rife.

As a result, opposition to the Bill was widespread, not confined to radical activists, and this was repeatedly proven by huge demonstrations, some of which brought one-third of the population onto the streets. In addition, there were specific protests by, for example, medical staff, lawyers, journalists and even civil servants in response to police repression or threats to individual rights. Week after week, from early June, the government tried to tough it out, leading to clashes between police and, in particular, younger activists who had been radicalised by the "Occupy" movement of 2014.

Eventually, in July, the government made a partial retreat and announced that it would not proceed with the Bill in the Legislative Council, Legco. By then, however, this was not enough. Not only did activists point out that it could always be brought back in a later session but they now had other demands arising out of the police attacks; release of those detained, exoneration of those arrested and rejection of the characterisation of the demonstrators as "rioters".

As a result, the demos continued, now demanding not only the full withdrawal of the Bill but also the resignation of Carrie Lam and, increasingly often, the introduction of universal equal suffrage; the demand that had fuelled the 2014 movement. At the same time, the police also escalated their actions against the protesters, even making use of the Triads, Hong Kong's mafia, to try to terrorise the movement into submission. In the last week of August, police arrested two well known activists, Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow, as well as three pro-democracy Legco members, Cheng Chung-tai, Au Nok-hin and Jeremy Tam Man-ho.

Those arrests appeared to be a response to plans for a demonstration on August 30 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the introduction of the highly undemocratic electoral system which led to the Occupy movement. That demonstration was banned but protests went ahead anyway and led to violent clashes with police.

In preceding weeks, when peaceful street demonstrations and meetings were attacked by police with tear gas and rubber bullets, the crowds escaped by taking cover in subway stations and trains. At the end of August, Beijing-loyal news media accused the Mass Transit Railway, MTR, of aiding such "criminal"

behaviour by the demonstrators so, now, MTR closed several stations and, eventually, several whole lines. In response, activists daubed graffiti on stations and, in some places, wrecked ticket machines, accusing the MTR of enforcing Beijing's rule.

The general sense that events were moving towards some kind of breaking point was heightened by the movement of mainland para-military police to the border city of Shenzhen. If this was meant to intimidate the movement, it failed dramatically. Footage of fully armed riot police bludgeoning young activists on the floors of subway trains, or filling train carriages with tear gas, actually hardened the attitudes of the broader public, generally sympathetic to the protest movement anyway.

This may have prompted the decision to formally withdraw the Bill. If so, it is likely only to be a tactical change, designed to drive a wedge between the increasingly radical activists and the rest of the population. The strategic objective, gradually to erode both the distinctive character of Hong Kong and to reduce its economic role, is likely to remain.

The brutality of police actions may have helped to maintain the weekly demonstrations but that is not enough to explain either their scale or the breadth of support. Their underlying strength was precisely the general opposition to the ongoing threat to civil rights and the undemocratic character of the Hong Kong system of government, in which half the votes in Legco go to professional associations with very close ties to the government and the Chief Executive is effectively appointed by Beijing.

It is likely that the government will now prioritise a charm offensive aimed at "public opinion" while processing the more than 1,000 people arrested in recent months to identify, and prosecute, those it sees as ringleaders. The immediate objective will be to prevent the democracy movement disrupting plans for "patriotic" demonstrations to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic on October 1.

The democracy movement also needs to review and develop its tactics. While continuing to raise all its demands, it needs to recognise that demonstrations alone will not force fundamental concessions from a Hong Kong government controlled from Beijing.

Since the first huge demonstrations in early June, there have been two calls from the Hong Kong Confederation of Trades Unions, HKCTU, for workers to join the protests. These have had some success, even though living costs, especially housing, are very high in Hong Kong and striking is by no means an easy decision for workers. Yet strike action is potentially a far more effective weapon than even the most militant, or violent, demonstration since it targets the territory's most important role, as a trading and financial centre for the whole of China.

To turn the HKCTU's calls for protests into a real general strike, a strike that paralyses the territory and is maintained until it wins its demands, means, first of all, winning workers to the need for such a strike. That is the task of the most radical activists and socialists here and now. Learning from the experience of the working class internationally, that strikes have to be organised and controlled by the strikers themselves, they must campaign for workplace organisation, political training and practical measures to ensure support for a sustained fight.

Even to do that, however, means that the activists themselves have to be organised on the basis of agreement on the necessary political strategy, tactics and forms of organisation needed to really take the struggle forward. In other words, a political programme which is the basis for the nucleus of a revolutionary party rooted in the working class.

