

Hong Kong: Police ban demo, troops move to the border

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A march through Central Hong Kong, the eleventh since early June, called by the Civil Human Rights Front for Sunday, August 18, has been banned by Hong Kong's police chiefs. The central demands of the democracy movement are the complete withdrawal of the proposed Extradition Law, the release of all demonstrators still being held, the dropping of charges against more than 600 and an independent inquiry into police collaboration with the Triads, Hong Kong's mafia. The Front, however, specifically called this march in protest at police violence during street demos last week and the protest at the international airport on Monday and Tuesday.

Particularly for thousands of young activists, it is the tactics used by the police that are driving the demonstrations, as much as the campaign demands. The occupation of the airport, for example, was a response to the use of hundreds of rounds of tear gas, even in very confined spaces such as metro stations, and the firing of rubber bullets and bean bags into crowds at close range during last week's demonstrations. The presence of streams of international travellers at the airport not only gave protesters the opportunity to explain their demands to a broader audience but also afforded some protection from the police.

Nonetheless, there were several bloody clashes, some sparked by the presence of undercover police, posing as demonstrators but guiding arrests of individual activists. The number of serious injuries even led medical staff at seven hospitals in the city to stage sit-ins on Tuesday in protest at police violence.

That violence has been matched, perhaps encouraged, by increasingly aggressive official statements from both Hong Kong and mainland authorities. Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong, for example, issued a statement saying the protesters' actions at the airport were "no different from violence conducted by terrorists". This is intended as a clear warning that the police will be allowed to treat them as such. The provocative language was also backed up by action; the well-publicised stationing of thousands of paramilitary police in a sports stadium in Shenzhen, just over the border from Hong Kong.

Although their presence alone underlines the gravity of the situation, few believe these forces would actually move into Hong Kong itself. That could only be decided by Beijing and the mainland government has a real interest in maintaining the fiction of "one country, two systems". Literally billions of dollars of investment and trade pass through Hong Kong every year precisely because foreign investors and corporations regard its separate legal system as a more reliable defence of their interests than that of the mainland.

The USA, for example, has its Hong Kong Policy Act that allows US corporations to trade via Hong Kong but not directly with the mainland. That was passed in 1992, when Washington realised it could miss out

on the rich profits to be made in China if it maintained the blanket sanctions policy introduced after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.

Today, there is a proposal that the Act should be renewed each year so that, if Hong Kong's autonomy is breached, sanctions can be applied. Clearly, an occupation by paramilitary police, let alone the People's Liberation Army, would be such a breach, and that will weigh heavily in Beijing's calculations.

Nonetheless, an even weightier consideration is the possibility that a successful defiance of the central government by a mass movement demanding democratic rights might trigger such a movement on the mainland itself. As long as the Democracy Movement can be portrayed as a middle class campaign orchestrated by the USA or the old colonial power, the United Kingdom, there will be little sympathy for it, but a movement openly calling for democratic rights and mobilising the working class would be a different proposition.

General strike

That is the significance of the day of protest on Monday, August 5, which was supported by the call for a general strike from the Hong Kong Confederation of Trades Unions, HKCTU. There were significant stoppages in many sectors across the territory, demonstrating the real depth of hostility not only to the proposed Extradition Act but, more generally, to the inability of the HK government to prevent the erosion of autonomy.

This was not a general strike in the sense of the workers' organisations mobilising their full weight to close down the territory until their demands were met, however. The HKCTU is the smaller of the two union organisations and the larger one, the Hong Kong Federation of Trades Unions, HKFTU, is pro-Beijing and hostile to the democracy movement. In effect, August 5 saw the HKCTU call on workers to support the existing leadership of the movement, the Civil Human Rights Front, composed largely of representatives of NGOs and professional organisations.

Nonetheless, the realisation that what is needed is more than demonstrations at the weekends is an important step forward that the Left in Hong Kong should build on. The danger now is that the authorities will follow the same strategy as against the Occupy movement in 2014; depoliticise repression by relying on the courts to impose injunctions that then justify selective imprisonment to remove key activists, and wait for the movement to run out of ideas and dynamism as the schools and universities return in September. They might even realise that the heavy handed police tactics are helping to maintain the movement at present.

What is certain is that the existing leadership of the movement, which prides itself on its support not only from the general public but also from the business and commercial classes, will never be able to call for, never mind organise, the scale of action necessary to force real concessions from Beijing. Their campaign is ultimately based on the belief that, if they can prove their demands have the overwhelming support of the people of Hong Kong, the government will have to concede to those demands in the end.

As 2014 showed, that is simply not true. After the huge demonstrations in June and July, with up to two million on the streets, there is no doubt the people support the demands but, even if that carried any weight with one Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, it certainly does not with her masters in Beijing. Progress for the movement now depends not on the force of argument, but on the argument of force. That means, above all, paralysing Hong Kong's function as a key conduit for trade and finance between China and the rest of the world.

Only a real general strike, a strike that stops all production, all transport, all publications, all broadcasting,

can do that. Such a strike cannot be mobilised out of thin air, it has to be built for within the workplaces and housing estates themselves. That is the task that the Left and the thousands of student activists should set themselves. For that, the existing campaign slogans are unlikely to be enough.

Particularly against the pro-Beijing unions, the movement must raise demands against the gaping inequality in Hong Kong, for a huge increase in funding for social housing, social services, health and education. Already, the call for universal suffrage and an elected, not appointed, government in Hong Kong is heard on the demonstrations and the workers' movement should make that a central demand, but not only for Hong Kong, for the whole of China.

Limits

The existing campaign is reaching the limits of what it can do and within it there is a permanent discussion about the way forward. Within that ferment of ideas, those who realise both the necessity and the urgency of working class mobilisation, who see through the utopian fantasy of Independence for Hong Kong and understand the need to take the fight against Beijing's one party bureaucratic dictatorship to the mainland itself, need to organise themselves as the nucleus of a new workers' party, dedicated to the overthrow of both that dictatorship and that of the capitalists in both Hong Kong and China.

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