

Mass protests erupt in Hong Kong

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A massive demonstration and march through the streets of Hong Kong yesterday, against planned changes to its extradition law, is a clear sign of a growing political radicalisation of broad layers of the population determined to defend basic democratic rights.

The proposed amendments to the Fugitive Ordinance law would expand the current extradition arrangements to include China. This has provoked widespread concern that the Beijing regime could use the legislation's provisions to have political opponents and religious dissidents, indeed anyone regarded as a threat, dispatched on trumped-up charges to the Chinese mainland to be tried and jailed.

According to the organisers, more than a million people took part in yesterday's protest—in other words, almost one in seven of Hong Kong's total population of 7.4 million. Placards and banners included “No China extradition!” and “Step Down Carrie Lam!”. Chief Executive Lam is Hong Kong's top official and thus responsible for the legislation.

Protesters in Hong Kong (Credit: Twitter: Denise Ho)

The vast crowds included a wide array of student organisations, migrant workers from southern China, political parties, religious groups, and non-profit organisations as well as many thousands of concerned individuals. At least 90 shops shut their doors to enable their employees to take part.

Marchers chanting “Open the street!” surged past police barricades to surround the Hong Kong legislative building where the law is due to be heard again on Wednesday. Five hours after the march began the Legislative Council complex was still surrounded as organisers foreshadowed further protests. In the early hours of today, riot police used batons and capsicum spray to violently disperse the remaining protesters.

Smaller protests also took place in 29 cities around the world, including New York, San Francisco,

Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto and Taipei, demanding the legislation be withdrawn. “I'm here today because I fear that I might be extradited to mainland China for crimes that I didn't commit,” Henry Lee, a Hongkonger currently living in Melbourne, told the *South China Morning Post*.

Yesterday's mass demonstration is the latest in a series of protests that have been mounting since the extradition legislation was first mooted in February, despite assurances from Lam that political and religious dissidents were not at risk and the independence of the Hong Kong courts was assured. Fears have grown as the executive has sought to ram the amendments through the legislative council by-passing committee scrutiny. Tensions have erupted in physical clashes between legislators over anti-democratic procedures.

The annual vigil in Hong Kong on June 4 to mark the Tiananmen Square massacre drew record numbers with more than 180,000 people filling all six soccer fields and adjoining areas of the city's Victoria Park. They came not only to demonstrate their opposition to Beijing's barbaric military crackdown 30 years ago but also out of concern over the extradition legislation. Undoubtedly, the protest included those who fled to Hong Kong in 1989 and fear they could be arrested and sent back.

Britain handed back its former colony to China in 1997, on the basis that Hong Kong would be a Special Administrative Region (SAR) with a large degree of autonomy under its Basic Law. Beijing's policy of “One Country, Two Systems” maintained capitalist property relations in Hong Kong which, in turn, served a critical function for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as it accelerated capitalist restoration on the mainland. Foreign corporations, and indeed Chinese companies, set up headquarters in Hong Kong where their operations in China were solidly guaranteed by its long-established commercial law.

Despite its claims to abide by Hong Kong autonomy,

the CCP regime has repeatedly attempted to encroach on democratic rights in its bid to suppress political opposition on its doorstep. In 2003, half a million people marched in Hong Kong to oppose a National Security Bill that would effectively have extended China's police-state measures to the city. The bill was shelved indefinitely.

In 2014, mass protests erupted over Beijing's plans to maintain tight control over the choice of Hong Kong's chief executive, who wields wide powers in the administration of the city. While bourgeois liberal opponents such as Democratic Party founder Martin Lee were prepared to compromise, student groups took to the streets to demand free and open elections, sparking street occupations that lasted for weeks, before they petered out and were suppressed by police. Beijing made no changes to its highly restrictive vetting of candidates for the post of chief executive.

If the current protests against the anti-extradition legislation are to go forward, lessons must be learnt from past experiences. Chief among these is the political perspective that needs to be fought for.

The failure of the 2014 Occupy or Umbrella movement was not a result of the lack of determination and courage of its youthful participants. Rather it stemmed from the fact that its leaders from the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism, while more militant in their tactics and more forthright in their demands, had no political alternative to conservative liberals such as Martin Lee.

Once again, Democratic Party figures such as Lee are prominent in the current protests against the extradition law. They are aligned with sections of Hong Kong's corporate elite that have also opposed the legislation out of concern that it could undermine the courts and Hong Kong's attractiveness as a base for investment into China.

Lee and his allies are also promoting the dangerous illusion that the United States can be enlisted to fight for democratic rights in Hong Kong. Last month Lee led a delegation to Washington which met with, among others, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well as the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China. The Trump administration has not the slightest concern for "human rights" in Hong Kong or anywhere else for that matter, but will seek to exploit the movement as part of its escalating confrontation and

war drive against Beijing.

Hong Kong is one of the most socially polarised cities in the world and becoming more unequal every year. The economy is dominated by a handful of multi-billionaires while the majority of the population struggle to even put a roof over their heads, with many forced to live in makeshift accommodation such as "cage houses."

A struggle for democratic rights in Hong Kong must be based on the working class and is bound up with the broader fight against austerity and basic social rights such as decent jobs and wages. This means a political struggle based on a socialist program against the domination of the present protests by figures like Lee and other defenders of capitalism who are organically hostile to any mobilisation of the working class.

It also means a rejection of all those who base their opposition to the extradition laws on Hong Kong parochialism and stoke hostility not only to the CCP regime, but to mainland Chinese in general. The fight for democratic rights in Hong Kong will only go forward to the extent that it turns to and champions the struggles of the Chinese workers for their democratic and social rights.

Above all, a revolutionary leadership must be built in the working class based on the historical lessons of the protracted struggle of the Trotskyist movement for socialist internationalism against Stalinism in all its forms, including Maoism, which is responsible for the police-state regime in Beijing. This is perspective for which the International Committee of the Fourth International fights.

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