

How to fight for democratic rights in Hong Kong

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Since early June, mass protests in Hong Kong involving up to two million people have demanded that its pro-Beijing administration headed by Chief Executive Carrie Lam withdraw its extradition legislation, end police violence and allow election by universal suffrage. Lam, backed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, has refused to do anything but suspend legislation that would allow extradition to the Chinese mainland.

After nearly three months of continuous protests, the issue confronting the Hong Kong workers, young people and intellectuals is how to take forward the struggle for basic democratic rights. It takes on greater urgency as Beijing masses heavily-armed, para-military police in the city of Shenzhen adjacent to Hong Kong and has threatened to intervene to violently suppress the demonstrations.

The protracted protests, which are also being driven by broader concerns about glaring social equality, and the lack of affordable housing and decent jobs, part of the global resurgence of the working class, as expressed in the “yellow vest” movement in France, mass demonstrations in Puerto Rico and a growing strike movement around the world.

Workers and youth fighting for democratic rights in Hong Kong must turn to this developing global movement of the working class—the only social force capable of waging a consistent struggle for democracy. The response of the ruling classes in country after country to the upsurge of the class struggle is to turn to police state measures and the promotion of far-right and fascistic forces.

Hong Kong workers need to reach out in particular to their class brothers and sisters in China who confront the same class enemy—the Stalinist regime in Beijing which is not socialist or communist, but defends the interests of the corporate elite and the super-rich.

The working class must reject the lies propagated by Beijing that the Hong Kong protests are the product of a

handful of radical extremists or the “black hand” of US imperialism—claims that are belied by the fact that millions of people have been involved. Moreover, recognising they could potentially face mass opposition at home, the response of Washington and its allies has been generally sympathetic, not to the protesters, but rather to Beijing.

The chief political weakness of the protests in Hong Kong has been absence of working-class leadership fighting for the program that expresses its class interests—socialist internationalism. As a result, the protest movement has been politically dominated by pro-capitalist parties, groups and trade unions narrowly focused on parochial Hong Kong interests.

Its demands have been shaped by the Civil Human Rights Front comprising a collection of NGOs, political parties and groups associated with the pan-democrat grouping in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council. The opposition pan-democrats represent the interests of layers of the city’s corporate elite who are concerned at Beijing’s encroachment, but are deeply hostile to a movement of the working class that threatens their profits and businesses.

Tens of thousands of workers took part in a general strike on August 5—the first in decades independently of the trade unions. The Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU), which is aligned with the pan-democrats, nominally supported the general strike, but did not call a stoppage of its nearly 200,000 members. Pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Action which is affiliated to the Committee for a Workers International, have above all sought to keep workers tied to these pro-capitalist unions and official opposition parties.

The perspective of the pan-democrats is to exploit the protests to push Beijing and the Hong Kong administration for limited concessions. In doing so, they also appeal to the major powers—especially the United States and the former colonial ruler Britain—to also apply

pressure to the CCP apparatus.

Neither Washington nor London has the slightest concern for defending democratic rights in Hong Kong or anywhere else. Under the banner of “human rights,” the US and its allies have waged criminal wars of aggression in the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia and instigated regime-change operations in country after country.

It is not to Washington and London that Hong Kong workers should address their appeals but to the hundreds of millions of workers in Chinese cities like Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing.

The protracted protests in Hong Kong certainly reflect the determination and courage particularly of young people to fight for basic democratic rights. However, without a turn to the working class, the protests will end in a disaster—either a rotten compromise by the pan-democrats and the Civil Human Rights Front or the bloody suppression of the movement by the Stalinist regime in Beijing and its security forces.

To unify the Chinese working class, it is essential to oppose all forms of nationalism and chauvinism—including both the CCP’s Chinese patriotism and Hong Kong parochialism. The latter takes particularly vile forms with right-wing groups such as Hong Kong Indigenous and Civic Passion that have staged violent provocations against “mainlanders.” It is not Chinese mainlanders who are to blame for the lack of jobs and high prices, but the oppressive capitalist system that subordinates every aspect of life to corporate profit.

To fight for democratic and social rights it is necessary to construct a working-class party based on socialist internationalism. This requires the political clarification of the key strategic experiences of the 20th century, above all of the treacherous role of Stalinism and its Chinese variant, Maoism. It was the reactionary Stalinist theory of “Socialism in One Country” that was responsible for the deformed workers’ state that emerged from the 1949 revolution. Having led China into a blind alley, the CCP from the 1970s onwards reached an accommodation with US imperialism and turned to capitalist restoration. The CCP today presides over a capitalist regime that defends the interests of a handful of ultra-rich oligarchs.

The very fact that Hong Kong remained a British colonial enclave in China demonstrates the Maoist regime’s willingness to compromise with imperialism. There is no doubt that the working class in Hong Kong in 1949 was ready to wage a struggle to throw out the British colonialists, but the CCP with its peasant armies

was intent on suppressing independent action by workers in any of the Chinese cities. Nearly a half century later, Britain was willing to hand back its entrepot to Beijing, well aware that there were not two systems, but only one—capitalism in both Hong Kong and China.

Anyone who believes that the CCP and its political servants in Hong Kong will be pressured to make meaningful democratic reforms should recall the events of 1989 that led to what is known as the Tiananmen Square massacre. Confronted with a mass movement, not just of students but of the working class in Beijing and throughout China, the Stalinist regime did not hesitate to carry out a bloody military crackdown.

Such an outcome was not inevitable, however. The mass movement involving millions of workers shook the regime to its very core. In the critical weeks leading up to the military repression, what was lacking in China, as in Hong Kong today, was a revolutionary leadership, steeped in the lessons of the betrayals of Stalinism. That is the pressing need today: to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which alone has fought a decades-long struggle against Stalinism and all forms of opportunism.

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