

Hong Kong mass rally banned as Chinese troops deployed in show of force

By Mike Head
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Fearful of rising political and social discontent across China, the Stalinist regime in Beijing has stepped up its preparations to suppress the near-three month mass movement in Hong Kong. On Thursday, Beijing's administration in Hong Kong banned a major rally planned for Saturday, as thousands of fresh troops were deployed to the territory.

Since June 9, protests in Hong Kong involving up to two million people have demanded the complete withdrawal of extradition legislation that could be used to hand political activists over to Beijing. Their "five demands" also include an end to the intensifying police violence and charges against demonstrators, and elections by universal suffrage—a basic democratic demand that was also long denied under the pre-1997 British colonial rule.

The protracted protests, mostly involving young people, are being driven by underlying student and working-class concerns about escalating social inequality, low wages and the lack of affordable housing and decent jobs. The Hong Kong rebellion is part of a global resurgence of the working class, which includes strikes in mainland China, overwhelming strike votes by US auto workers, huge demonstrations in Puerto Rico and the ongoing anti-austerity "yellow vest" movement in France.

Thursday's rejection by Hong Kong police of a request by the Civil Human Rights Front to hold a rally on Saturday is the first time such a ban has been applied to an entire day's event by that organisation. Previous rallies called by the coalition have been huge and mostly peaceful. But the police now claim that Saturday's protest could turn violent and have threatened that anyone taking part could be arrested. "If you take part in the already forbidden public assembly... you might be imprisoned for a maximum of five

years," a police spokesman said.

The Front has appealed against the ban. The march is scheduled to end near the Chinese central government's liaison office. A fortnight ago, an estimated 1.7 million people marched across Hong Kong after the Front's last rally. It was a mass act of civil disobedience, because the police had authorised the demonstration, but not the march.

The Front is an alliance of NGOs, political parties and groups associated with the pan-democrat grouping in Hong Kong's Legislative Council. The pan-democrats represent the interests of the city's super-rich corporate elite, which is seeking to protect its position from Beijing's encroachment. But the protest movement has threatened to develop out of their control. It has mobilised workers and youth whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the Hong Kong billionaires, whose fortunes are based on the ruthless exploitation of Chinese workers since the restoration of capitalism by the Beijing Stalinists from the 1970s.

The role of the working class re-emerged on Wednesday when a group of unidentified protesters from 21 industries held a press conference calling for a two-day strike starting next Monday. The industries include allied health, dentistry, social welfare, information technology, insurance, retailing, logistics, construction, engineering, aviation, banking, finance, accounting, advertising, marketing, music, arts, design and culture, and hotel and tourism.

The Hong Kong Secondary Students Union also announced that students from more than 90 schools across the city would join a class boycott starting from Tuesday.

During the last citywide strike on August 5, seven rallies were held in different areas. Traffic in several

districts was brought to a standstill, and clashes between protesters and police broke out.

Just before Thursday's protest ban was announced, China's military dispatched new troops to Hong Kong. The Beijing authorities insisted it was a routine rotation of its Hong Kong garrisons of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). But it was clearly another threatening show of force, directed against working class discontent in mainland China, not just Hong Kong.

China Central Television showed a long convoy of armoured personnel carriers and trucks crossing the border into Hong Kong on Wednesday night, and troops in formation disembarking from a ship. Earlier, scores of soldiers ran in unison onto trucks, which the state broadcaster said were bound for Hong Kong.

"This time the task has a glorious mission. The responsibility is great. The job is difficult," an unnamed major told troops before they departed. "The time for a true test has arrived!" The deployment of fresh troops is seen as ominous because a similar "rotation" occurred in Beijing just before the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

The Hong Kong garrison earlier published a promotional video with scenes of soldiers facing off with people dressed like protesters. The Garrison Law, approved as part of Britain's 1997 handover of its colony, allows the troops to intervene against civil unrest at the request of the city government. The Hong Kong garrison is estimated to consist of between 8,000 and 10,000 troops, mostly in former British army barracks.

This is the second display of military might this month. Two weeks ago, hundreds of People's Armed Police conducted exercises at a sports stadium in Shenzhen, just across the border. Last weekend, Hong Kong police also ramped up the administration's violence, using water cannon trucks, as well as tear gas and rubber bullets and, for the first time, drawing guns on protesters.

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam this week refused to rule out media speculation that her administration was considering invoking the sweeping Emergency Regulations Ordinance imposed by Britain to put down a general strike and associated unrest in 1922.

Police have arrested almost 900 demonstrators since June 9, and pro-regime thugs have viciously attacked

protesters. This has failed to quell the movement, however, which is fuelled by seething class tensions.

"Economic discontent a primary force behind Hong Kong unrest," the *South China Morning Post* warned yesterday. It reported that many young people see no future because of soaring property prices and costs of living, while workers find it difficult to make ends meet. Between 1984 and 2018, average annual wage growth among workers below the supervisory level was just 1.12 percent, while the wealth of the financial aristocracy soared at their expense.

To whip up Chinese nationalism and justify repression, Beijing claims that the Hong Kong protests are the work of "extremists" or US-backed elements, but the response of Washington and its allies has been generally sympathetic to the regime. Two weeks ago, US President Donald Trump solidarised himself with Chinese President Xi Jinping in the "tough business" of dealing with social unrest. "He is a great leader who very much has the respect of his people," Trump tweeted.

Trump's comments were a sign of the nervousness in the ruling class globally about the protest movement in Hong Kong and its potential to feed into similar discontent internationally over deepening social inequality and attacks on fundamental democratic rights.

The great danger is that, thus far, the protest movement has been politically dominated by pro-capitalist parties, groups and trade unions narrowly focused on parochial Hong Kong interests, and some promoting separatism and illusions in the US, Britain and other imperialist powers. Hong Kong workers need to reach out to their class brothers and sisters worldwide who are fighting similar conditions, especially across China. The fight for international unity and action requires building a new revolutionary socialist leadership.

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