

Hong Kong arrests prominent pan-democrat activists

By Ben McGrath
25 April 2020

On April 18, Hong Kong police arrested 15 prominent activists and politicians associated with the city's pan-democrat political bloc. They have been charged with unlawful assembly in regard to their participation last year in demonstrations on August 18 and October 1 and 20, which were part of the broader mass protest movement sparked in June by a controversial extradition bill. Some have been released on bail and all are expected in court on May 18.

Those arrested include founder of the Democratic Party Martin Lee, a leader of the Labour Party Lee Cheuk-yan, businessman Jimmy Lai, and former lawmaker Margaret Ng. Leung Yiu-chung, the only currently sitting lawmaker in the Legislative Council, and Figo Chan, 24, one of the student leaders of the protest movement, were also arrested.

Beijing expressed "resolute support" for the arrests and accused those detained of being "radicals," who "ignore the intervention of external forces in the internal affairs of Hong Kong" and "even seek foreign countries to sanction Hong Kong."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo seized on the arrests to denounce China on Twitter last Saturday, saying, "Arrests of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong are deeply concerning—politicized law enforcement is inconsistent with universal values of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly."

In response, China's Foreign Ministry accused Washington of "condoning evil acts and making a travesty of the rule of law by ignoring facts, distorting the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and trying to exonerate anti-China troublemakers in Hong Kong on the pretext of 'transparency,' 'the rule of law' and 'a high degree of autonomy.'"

The US is using the arrests to continue its campaign

of ramping up tensions with Beijing across the board. Earlier this week, the US navy provocatively sent warships into the South China Sea, near territory claimed by Beijing. The Trump administration has unleashed a propaganda campaign blaming China for the COVID-19 pandemic to divert attention from its own criminal responsibility for the disaster at home.

As tens of thousands die, millions of Americans file for unemployment, and workers strike against unsafe and deadly conditions, the entire ruling elite in Washington has accused Beijing of covering up the spread of the virus and insinuated on the basis of no evidence that it originated in a Wuhan laboratory.

It is in this context that Beijing is deeply concerned that Washington may try to use unrest in Hong Kong or another part of China for the latter's own benefit. The Trump administration has not the slightest concern for democratic rights in China or anywhere else. For all of Pompeo's talk of "universal values of freedom of expression," he is a leading official in a government that has carried out the persecution of journalists like Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning for exposing crimes committed by the US state.

In addition to the recent arrests, Luo Huining, the head of Beijing's Liaison Office in Hong Kong, on April 15 called for the passing of controversial national security legislation, shelved in 2003 due to mass protests. The law, known as Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law, would allow the city government to "enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets."

To justify the arrests, China exploited the close relations these politicians have with the US state. Martin Lee has long advocated a more accommodating stance towards Beijing while making open appeals to

US imperialism. Last May, Lee, along with Lee Cheuk-yan and Margaret Ng, met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other senior US officials in Washington, shortly before the protests began.

Jimmy Lai's longtime assistant Mark Simon is a former US naval intelligence officer with close ties to the CIA. He has aided Lai in securing meetings with leading US officials over the years including talks last July with Pompeo, as well as former National Security Advisor John Bolton and Vice President Mike Pence, among others. Lai has also supplied funds to several pan-democrat politicians in the past.

Last November, during the Halifax International Security Forum, which is held in Halifax, Canada, but based in Washington, Figo Chan, the student leader, accepted the John McCain Prize for Leadership in Public Service. Senior United States government officials used the 2019 forum to place additional military and economic pressure on China in pursuit of its goal of forcing Beijing to accept US imperialist domination.

These figures played various roles in last year's protests that erupted in June as millions demonstrated against an extradition law that would allow political opponents of Beijing to be arrested and sent to the mainland.

Those arrested last Saturday, along with the entire pan-democrat bloc, worked to prevent the movement from orienting to the working class in Hong Kong, and also China, without which any struggle for democratic rights is impossible. As such, the pan-democrats created the conditions in which Beijing and the Hong Kong ruling class could recover and clamp down on the pro-democracy movement.

Beijing hopes that it can now silence and intimidate workers and students in Hong Kong to prevent a resurgence of protests, on the pretext that the opposition was purely the product of "external forces." However, the movement maintained its intensity in large part because they were fueled by attacks on democratic rights and poor working and social conditions. Hong Kong is one of the most socially unequal cities in the world.

The underlying anger in Hong Kong has not disappeared, but in order to defend living conditions and democratic rights the protest movement needs a revolutionary leadership base in the working class on

the principles of socialist internationalism. Only in this way can such a movement fight against the police state measures of the Chinese regime while resisting the attempts of US imperialism to exploit the opposition for its own purposes.

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