

# Hong Kong police carry out mass arrest of protesters

By Ben McGrath  
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Police violently attacked demonstrations held last Sunday in Hong Kong over the delay of the city's Legislative Council (LegCo) elections. Protesters also denounced the new national security law passed at the end of June, which is designed to further clamp down on free speech and democratic rights in Hong Kong. Police responded by arresting at least 289 people.

The LegCo general election was originally slated for Sunday, but was postponed for one year at the end of July, with the government claiming it was necessary in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The delay was clearly a political decision, made over concerns that the pan-democrats, an election bloc of the city's official political opposition, might win a majority. In local district elections last November, the pan-democrats took 347 out of 452 district council seats and 17 of 18 councils. Twelve opposition candidates had also been barred from contesting the election prior to its postponement.

The protests were promoted by anonymous online activists. While the organizers' exact affiliations are unknown, undoubtedly there are many in Hong Kong concerned about the growing attacks on democratic rights who supported the call to demonstrate but feared that voicing their feelings openly could lead to arrest.

The organizers hoped to gather 50,000 people, but the demonstrations were smaller than those in the recent past. Protests began in the Jordan neighborhood of Kowloon before spreading to Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok. Some participants chanted, "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times," a slogan popularized by right-wing "localist" groups.

In response, the authorities mobilized 2,000 heavily armed riot police, with water cannons and armored vehicles on standby. Despite the relatively small numbers involved, police violently assaulted

demonstrators with pepper spray and pepper balls. Protesters were hit with batons and knocked to the ground, including a 12-year-old girl whose mother said she was not involved in the demonstration.

Police targeted journalists, threatening them with arrest for covering the rally and the violent response of the police and claiming that they could be considered protest participants. At least one photographer was detained.

Senior Police Superintendent Li Kwai-wah used the pandemic to justify the assaults and the arrests. "If you organize, incite or participate in such gatherings, you are breaking the law and will be arrested," Li stated. Under COVID-19 restrictions in the city, public gatherings of more than two people are banned.

The majority of those arrested were accused of illegal assembly. Others were detained for disorderly conduct, obstructing police officers, or for failure to produce identity cards. One woman was held for supposedly chanting pro-Hong Kong independence slogans, a violation of the national security law. The last mass arrest of protesters was on July 1 when 370 people were detained.

League of Social Democrats (LSD) members were among those arrested, including Leung Kwok-hung (also known as "Long Hair"), Raphael Wong, and Figo Chan. The LSD is a middle-class protest group founded in 2006 by Leung and Albert Chan, a former Democratic Party member. It uses radical-sounding slogans and phrases combined with support for the pan-democrats in the LegCo as a means to prevent workers and youth from breaking with the political establishment.

Tam Tak-chi, a leader of the People Power group, which is allied with the LSD, was also arrested on Sunday for "uttering seditious words" and accused

under a British colonial era law. Tam had set up street booths between June and August where he criticized the government's COVID-19 response.

The fact that the protests have dwindled in size is not only due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. It is a result of the politics of the pan-democrats as a whole. The bloc is a collection of capitalist parties, though some like the LSD attempt to appear more radical, which fear that a genuine united movement of workers and youth fighting for democratic and social rights will threaten the pan-democrats' privileged positions within Hong Kong society.

This layer of the political establishment gives voice to elements within the Hong Kong bourgeoisie that are concerned about Beijing's encroachment on their business interests and appeal to US and British imperialism to pressure the Chinese government in their defense. As a result, they were largely absent from the protest movement last year when it was at its height.

When those protests erupted in June 2019 against legislation that would have allowed extradition of Beijing's political opponents to the mainland, there was far more behind the movement than simple opposition to the bill. Hong Kong is one of the most unequal cities in the world. It is home to the sixth largest number of billionaires on the planet, while one-fifth of the population lives below the official poverty line. Workers' wages have stagnated and safe and affordable housing is extremely difficult to find.

This economic discontent was reflected in August and September last year when tens of thousands of workers participated in strikes, demonstrating that there are deeper political, social, and economic issues at work. The entrance of the working class into the struggle sent waves of fear through the ruling class.

The movement, however, lacked a revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective and the pan-democrats and their allies were able to corral the protest movement behind right-wing and pro-imperialist appeals to the US or the UK for aid or even to "liberate Hong Kong." This cut the working class off from the broader protest movement, creating the situation in which Beijing and the Hong Kong ruling elites could recover and launch this year's attacks on democratic rights.

Hong Kong workers and progressive youth must not

place any faith in the pan-democrats regardless of their rhetoric. Those genuinely motivated by a desire to defend democratic and social rights must fight for the unity of the working class in the city and throughout China and fight for their political independence and for international socialism.

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