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Hong Kong

The International Left Must Come to the Aid of the Hong Kong People

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The Hong Kong government, in the face of the massive opposition movement since early June, finally made the promise to withdraw the China Extradition bill altogether in early September. However, the people have refused to put a halt to the movement. They continue pressing their five demands, formulated in July. The first four are related to the immediate situation (the complete withdrawal of the bill; establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police conduct; retraction of the designation of “riot” to describe the protests; amnesty for arrested protesters), and the fifth is universal suffrage – something that Beijing promised in the (1997) Basic Law. They have kept up their protests because the three-month struggle has revealed one simple fact: Beijing’s hidden agenda is to finish off Hong Kong’s autonomy altogether. This understanding has prompted them to continue the struggle, which has escalated into a great battle to save Hong Kong autonomy.

The Hong Kong government, a puppet of Beijing, launched a new round of attack on 4 October by banning mask-faced demonstration through invoking the 1922 Emergency Regulation Ordinance. Ironically the law was enacted by the then British colonial government to repress, unsuccessfully, the general strike led by the seaman’s union – then under the CCP leadership. This time the colonial act has been invoked again by a Chinese led Hong Kong government to crack down on its “fellow country folks”.

The Hong Kong people have always been denied the right to run their own affairs, be it under British or Beijing’s rule. Unlike the British, Beijing did promise Hong Kong people universal suffrage, only it never bothered to honour this promise. In fact, it has proven itself, in the aspect of “national identity”, to be more repressive than the British. Years before the China Extradition bill, Beijing already tried to impose its chauvinist version of “national identity” on Hong Kong which the British had not done: it tried to make the Hong Kong government enforce the “National Education curriculum” and the “National Anthem bill”, and there have also been efforts to replace Cantonese with Mandarin as medium of teaching. These attempts were all defeated by protest. Therefore, when the China Extradition bill was tabled the Hong Kong people knew very well that a complete show down with Beijing was now inevitable.

The 2 million participants on the 16 June march showed that the movement enjoys majority support. The movement is not demanding independence, as Beijing claims. Like all former colonial people, the Hong Kong people are also entitled to the right to self-determination, including the option of independence. However, the Hong Kong movement is unified under the very moderate “five demands”. There is a small and loose current that aspires for independence, but it has no influence in the movement.

Unlike the previous generations, young people do yearn for a Hong Kong identity, but this does not necessarily imply wanting independence. It is also precisely a reaction to Beijing’s increasingly nationalist and chauvinist policies. China, under the CCP, has today evolved into a repressive society that few in Hong Kong want to associate with, hence the aspiration for a “free Hong Kong”. The rise of a “Hong Kong identity” is not an isolated event either. There has been a rise of national sentiment among Taiwanese, Tibetans and Uyghurs as well. Like Hong Kong this is also a response to Beijing’s chauvinism. It could be safely stated that today Beijing itself is the cause of a great centrifugal force now gripping hold of China. Before it can attain its goal of national unification and glory, it is already losing the heart of Taiwan, Tibet, “Xinjiang”, and Hong Kong.

The absence of a sizeable leftist current in Hong Kong is a reflection of a remarkably weak labour movement. The horrible practices by the CCP, under the name of “communism” and “socialism”, continuously discredit leftist ideas, creating a hostile environment against it. This explains why the current movement is still limited to the five demands and fails to raise any socio-economic demands despite the huge inequality in the city. Yet the youth is forced to

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appeal to labour in the course of the struggle, and the joint effort of the youth and the unions made possible, for the first time for half a century, the outbreak of a general strike which paralysed half of Hong Kong on 5 August. The more the left can prove the strength of labour in real struggle the more it is able to prove its relevance once again.

Beijing accuses the movement of being an agent of “foreign intervention”. Given Hong Kong’s colonial legacy, the pan-democrat parties do have long-term links with the US and the UK’s establishment parties. Yet they have no leading role in the current movement at all. They only play a supportive role at most. No one can dismiss the fact that it is chiefly led by thousands of radical youth who give the movement its direction. They have no link at all to any current political parties, and they admire spontaneity so much that they deeply distrust organization and parties, and have close to zero political experience. Their inexperience led some of them to believe that the US is a genuinely democratic country. They have made mistakes, but they are not controlled by any “foreign forces”. Actually, they are not controllable by anyone.

A recent survey showed that nearly 40 per cent of students claim to be “localist”, but how the radical youth interprets this varies among themselves. Long before this movement the nativist interpretation had the largest influence amongst those who claimed to be “localist”. However, when this movement evolved into a huge mobilization it necessarily displayed multiple and conflicting tendencies. While there is a nativist current exhibiting anti-Mainland immigrant sentiment, there was also a much bigger demonstration trying to win over Mainland Chinese visitors. The left’s responsibility is to join the struggle and convince the youth with its democratic and inclusive position rather than standing outside of it.

That is not to say that “foreign forces” are entirely irrelevant, or to deny that they are interested in intervening in Hong Kong. But Hong Kong is not comparable with Ukraine. While the EU and the NATO are new players in the Ukraine’s turmoil since the turn of the century, the UK and US have always been tacitly recognized by Beijing as stake holders in Hong Kong. The so called “one country, two systems”, enshrined first in the 1984 Sino-British joint declaration and then in the 1997 Basic Law, was from the beginning a historic compromise by Beijing with the West in exchange for the latter’s permission to be re-integrated with global capitalism. The Basic Law’s solemn promise of “the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years” is first and foremost to appease Western influence and business interests. That is also why the Basic Law allows Hong Kong to keep its own British law, that its courts are allowed to hire foreign judges (article 92) and even to the extent of allowing foreigners to be employed as public servants from low to high grades except the ministerial and Chief Executive level (article 101). These clauses effectively protect the Western commercial and political interests there. Hence it is not in their interest to de-stabilize Hong Kong. This also explains why the UK and US quietly told the Hong Kong pan-democrats to accept Beijing’s political reform package in 2014 prior to the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement.

It is Beijing’s unilateral change of its Hong Kong policy, and especially its attempt to table the China Extradition bill, which is directly responsible for both the Hong Kong turmoil and the Western criticism of Beijing over the bill. After all, the bill not only targets Chinese, but also any foreigner who happens to be in Hong Kong. Accidentally there is now a narrowly defined common interest between the West and the Hong Kong people over the China Extradition Bill issue. Both want the bill to go away. Yet even after the bill was withdrawn, Hong Kong autonomy is still in danger, therefore a tricky situation still persists: although Hong Kong working people’s interests are fundamentally different from the Western governments, nevertheless in appearance both are demanding that Beijing honour its promise over Hong Kong autonomy. The US “Hong Kong’s Human Rights and Democracy” bill shows that the US ruling elites continue to try to tie the Hong Kong issue to their own foreign policy. The left needs to remind Hong Kong people that this shows that the US Empire is never their real friend; and that their democratic friends have to be found among the millions of US working people who are opposing Trump.

While both Mainland China and Hong Kong are capitalist there is, in terms of human and labour rights protection, a big difference between the two. While the latter allows, although with visible limits, the existence of a social movement, the former allows none. Actually, it is this Hong Kong feature which increasingly worries Beijing. Since the

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turn of the century, more and more people in the Mainland have begun to imitate Hong Kong's social movement and started organizing, informally or through NGOs. This was the price Beijing had to pay for making use of Hong Kong to help build China's new capitalism. Increasingly Beijing has found the price too high, and since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, Beijing must have thought that it had become strong enough to tear apart the Basic Law. This law tries to keep frozen a kind of capitalism which fundamentally discriminates against and exploits the working people, and is hence reactionary. However, it also contains clauses which protect human and labour rights. The international left must support the Hong Kong people's struggle to defend and expand their rights, not only because of the intrinsic value of their struggle, but also because their struggle continues to inspire China's own social movement, however small and downtrodden it is now.

Whatever weakness the anti-Extradition bill movement has displayed, it is of great historical significance: it is the first ever democratic movement in a part of China which is simultaneously massive, radical and rebellious, so powerful that it even successfully forced the government, backed by Beijing, to retreat. It is the re-awakening of a democratic consciousness, dressed in a "Hong Kong identity". The political strike has also left a deep mark in the consciousness of working people: it teaches them the great value of non-conformance. The Hong Kong movement also exposes the great weakness of China's "perfect authoritarianism". For more than four months Beijing has been unable to restore order in this city. Hong Kong, with its colonial legacy, for good or for bad, has become a painful thorn in the flesh of the dragon. The dragon is already in increasingly bad health. The death of this beast in the hands of progressive social movement is crucial for the future democratic transformation of China. This has also become one of the most important issues in the 21st century. On the one hand, the rise of Chinese capitalism has created the largest working class in the world and in history, while on the other hand its authoritarian capitalism is also one of the biggest threats to humanity and the planet's climate. A democratic transformation in China is a prerequisite for solving all these problems. This also makes our support of Hong Kong people's fight for democracy and justice even more urgent than ever.

Stand with Hong Kong People!

Five Demands, Not One Less!

Boycott Chinese Overseas Investment!

Democracy for Hong Kong and Mainland China!

Down with One Party Dictatorship!

Reject the Trump and Johnson Governments' interventions!

International Solidarity Among the Working People and All Progressive Forces!

Executive Bureau of the Fourth International

21 October 2019

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