

# Hong Kong : Democracy Drives Labor in a Hyper-Capitalist City

Friday 7 February 2020, by [McLAUGHLIN Timothy](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2020).

*Growing numbers of people are joining unions in Hong Kong to pressure the authorities to respond to their demands.*

Angel was scrolling through the messaging app Telegram late last year when she saw a notice advertising **a new union for health-care employees**; her interest was piqued.

As a 25-year-old nurse in the surgery department of a major Hong Kong hospital, she works long hours and sees how the facility consistently struggles with a shortage of workers. Nurses in busy wards skip their holidays and time off to cover shifts, and Angel worries about the quality of care patients receive. The nursing association she was a member of advocated for better working conditions, but the results were minimal: The main benefits were discounts on food and travel packages. *"It wasn't exactly about political issues,"* she told me of the group.

So Angel—who asked to be identified by her first name to avoid punishment from her employer—signed up for **the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (HAEA), an upstart organization born out of the prodemocracy protests** that have carried on here for months.

The sustained demonstrations have led to a surge of interest in organized labor:

Numbers from the city's labor department show that **one dozen unions were established in the final two months of 2019, the HAEA among them**. In the past year, at least 23 unions formed and were recognized by the labor department. Their organizers and members hope to **diversify protest tactics**, adding the possibility of **industrial action** to demonstrators' growing tool kit for **civil disobedience**.

At a New Year's Day march, union representatives courted new members with flyers and banners playing on popular protest slogans and memes. *"Resist tyranny, join a union"* was added to the chorus of chants.

Hong Kong is a hyper-capitalist city whose government regularly touts its ease of business as one of its finest accolades.

Unions here do not have collective bargaining power, and the largest labor group, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, is fervently pro-Beijing.

But the city also has a history dotted with labor strikes and organizing, events that have played a pivotal role in its development.

The renewed enthusiasm and interest point toward an invigorated labor movement. Until recently, though, it was unclear how the uptick in members and organizations could be wrangled and deployed.

This week provided an early indicator that **the fledgling unions will likely be a formidable new challenge for an already beleaguered, deeply unpopular government**.

Thousands of members of the HAEA have gone on strike to pressure authorities to close the border with mainland China, disrupting health services at public hospitals across the city. The workers believe that the measure is necessary to stop the spread of the new coronavirus, which has radiated out from China, creating a global health crisis.

Thus far, the health-care workers have received widespread support: **60 percent of respondents to a recent poll** conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute **said they backed the strike**, while numerous other labor organizations, some also only recently formed, have signaled their interest in expanding the strike, **potentially adding bus drivers, aviation workers, and educators to the mix.**

The prospect of a widening labor push rooted in the prodemocracy demonstrations would be another formalization of a movement that the government has been keen, but unable, to stamp out.

Leung Po-lung, the author of *A History of Early Hong Kong Workers and the Labor Movement*, told me that these unions mark **the beginning of a new wave of labor activism in Hong Kong.**

*"These people that are forming labor unions, it means that they have hope," he said. "The labor unions are utilizing their power against a government that is refusing to respond."*

The question remains, however, whether this movement will grip the city to the same extent that past strikes did, most notably in 1967. Then, routine labor disputes at a cement factory and artificial-flower plant quickly snowballed into larger grievances against the British colonial government that ruled Hong Kong. Buoyed by the gathering strength of the Cultural Revolution in China, left-wing labor unions pitted themselves against what the academics Benjamin Leung and Stephen Chiu have described as *"the symbols of imperialist and capitalist authorities in Hong Kong."*

Numerous labor actions, coordinated in part by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, spiraled into citywide violence. Leftists resorted to guerrilla tactics, carrying out assassinations and a deadly bombing campaign. Police officers killed several rioters and at one point staged a raid by helicopter. By the time the riots were put down, 51 people had died and more than 800 had been injured.

The Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU) faced a temporary setback for its role in the riots. But in the decades that followed, it deftly maneuvered along shifting political winds, aligning itself with the Chinese government in Beijing, and has largely been absolved of its role in the riots by the Hong Kong government.

A prodemocracy rival, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), emerged in 1990.

During Hong Kong's current protests, calls have been made for a general strike, but such actions—unlike the demonstrations themselves—have been largely underwhelming and limited.

**The continued refusal by Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's chief executive, to close the border with China, however, has spurred backlash.** Her resistance comes despite overwhelming public support for the move, with 80 percent of people polled by the Public Opinion Research Institute saying they are in favor of it. Lam has argued that a full closure is not in line with World Health Organization regulations and could be seen as discriminatory toward mainland residents.

As the strike, limited to nonessential workers, began on Monday 3, Lam softened her stance, announcing that she would close all but three border crossings. She said the strike played no role in her decision, adding that the effort would not succeed, and warned against people resorting to extreme measures. The partial border closing failed to quell the sense of unease and darkness on Hong Kong's streets, though, and the mood worsened Tuesday 4, when the first death in the city from the virus was recorded.

Work-from-home orders and the cancellation of school until March have made Hong Kong's normally packed sidewalks noticeably quieter. Supermarket shelves have at times been left empty by panic buying, as people fill carts with bags of rice, vegetables, and frozen dumplings.

**Lines for limited supplies of hand sanitizer and face masks stretch for blocks, with an estimated 10,000 people waiting in one such queue.**

Prison inmates who produce masks have been put on around-the-clock rotation to increase output.

Riot police have been dispatched to stop angry residents protesting the border remaining open and plans to keep those possibly infected in nearby housing estates. Officials recently unveiled electronic monitoring devices to be worn by people under quarantine, a measure that seems pulled from a

dystopian film. Some district councillors attempted to set up their own health checkpoint, and police say an unsuccessful bombing was linked to the border dispute.

Every government that moves to bar arrivals from China—a list that now includes regional countries such as Singapore as well as nations farther afield such as the Federated States of Micronesia—brings new exasperation. Some are now concerned that Hong Kong's refusal to shut the border means it will be cut off by airlines and foreign governments as they expand their own restrictions.

Much of the anger with the Hong Kong government about the coronavirus dovetails with grievances raised during the demonstrations started in response to a now-withdrawn bill that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China.

Lam, a career bureaucrat, has faced a string of familiar accusations in recent weeks—that she has placed servitude to Beijing over the well-being of Hong Kongers, that she has acted too slowly to stem the unfolding health crisis, that she has remained stubbornly resistant to popular demands despite opinion being overwhelmingly against her.

These frustrations are the same as those that helped fuel progressively confrontational protests last year. *"No matter how much we protest and try to speak to the government, they don't seem to care about citizens' health,"* Angel told me. (Lam's position is not helped by her unwavering support for the police, who have arrested and belittled medical workers during the prodemocracy protests, and whom doctors have protested against for excessive use of force.)

On Tuesday 4 morning, thousands of hospital staff in pastel-colored surgical masks snaked through the Kowloon area of Hong Kong as they waited to drop off their strike slips for day two of a planned five-day action. The HAEA is calling for barring any non-Hong Kong residents from entering the city via China. In line, Sam Chan, a physiotherapist, was, like almost everyone else I spoke with, surprised by the turnout. *"Originally, I thought maybe a few colleagues would be willing to join, because this may sacrifice our careers,"* the 25-year-old told me. *"We expect the government to punish us in the future."*

**According to the union, more than 7,000 workers took part that day, representing about 10 percent of all Hospital Authority staff.**

Yesterday afternoon (5-02), Lam announced another round of restrictions, requiring all travelers from mainland China entering Hong Kong, including the city's residents, to be quarantined for 14 days, meeting another demand of the union. The announcement came as Lam warned that the city was entering a "crucial period" to stop the spread of the disease, which has infected 21 people here so far.

Though the Hospital Authority says the strike has disrupted numerous services, including cancer treatments and work in neonatal intensive-care units, Ng Sek Hong, an expert on labor law at the University of Hong Kong, says the government's reaction to it has been filled with theatrical press conferences of little substance. Government authorities, he told me, *"expressed every contempt to listen to, not to mention to discuss with, the striking union on their grievances and demands,"* he told me.

Holding a red-and-white sign reading *save hk now*, Eugene, a 25-year-old nurse who works in a hospital gynecology department, told me that Lam was a *"slave of Xi"* who refused to listen to public demands, referring to Chinese President Xi Jinping. She expressed the anti-mainland sentiment that has crept into some discussions about the border closure, saying that mainland residents would be untruthful about their medical conditions and travels in China. *"All of the Chinese always tell lies and cross over into Hong Kong, and they can spread the virus,"* she said. The prodemocracy demonstrations, she added, had the unintended consequence of dissuading many mainland travelers from visiting the city, possibly thwarting a larger outbreak. *"We are very lucky because of the*

*protests last year,” she said. “They think that we are so violent and they didn’t come here.”*

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/history/>

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/02/unions-hong-kong-protest-coronavirus/606136/>