

Hong Kong: The dilemma of the New Union Movement

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Centering economic struggles has proven to be challenging in Hong Kong mainstream movements

Does the new union movement have the capacity to break through Hong Kong social movements' fixation on narrow political issues? Analyzing the questionnaire data they collected during the strike assembly on 5 August 2019, Fung Chi-keung and Lee Chun-wing demonstrate that protestors have harbored serious dissatisfaction towards economic injustice and oppression in their everyday lives. However, mainstream movements have long made use of identity and the constant refrain of "protecting our original, beautiful Hong Kong" (保護我們的香港) to mobilize the public politically, making it difficult over the years to shift attention towards economic oppression. The authors argue that, in order to broaden its base, the new union movement must overcome past tendencies that focus narrowly on movement outcomes. Rather, it needs to move away from ad hoc mobilization to an emphasis on everyday resistance and organizing. It must also explore different ways to harness the public's workplace grievances and resentment towards economic injustices to strengthen the union membership.

The large-scale protests that began last June has given rise to a new union movement. While there is no consensus on what makes this movement "new," and nor do we have the authority to define it, we believe that it is more than just young people forming unions, or bringing the battleground for the five demands to the workplace in hopes of launching a general strike. We believe that the power of the new unions lie in its ability to rectify the weaknesses of Hong Kong's past labor and anti-establishment movements.

Merging political and economic struggles

Since the 90s, Hong Kong's labor movements have largely been led by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), a stalwart supporter of the universal suffrage movement. However, what is undeniable is that in protests defined by single-mindedly political issues, the outcomes of organizing efforts by the HKCTU and its affiliates have been less than ideal. For example, in the 2014 Occupy Movement, an HKCTU affiliated organization once called for a strike. There was, however, no strong support from the public at the time; mainstream movements have always tended to place class issues outside of their main demands anyway. As such, some outsiders have criticized Hong Kong's labor movements as self-interested or overly fixated on job-related issues, while ignoring more "relevant" but ultimately limiting political issues such as universal suffrage. At the same time, there has been little to no critique of mainstream movements' neglect of class struggle and economic pressures. This dynamic, in turn, produced a situation in which economic and political mobilizations occur largely independently of each other in social movements.

We believe that it is possible for the new union movement to connect these two struggles. The immediate cause of the 2019 protest was public dissatisfaction towards the government's

unwillingness to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance. The reason this became a flashpoint had much to do with Hongkongers' suspicion towards the mainland Chinese judicial system. Hong Kong has always valued and emphasized the importance of the rule of law, and people grew concerned as soon as they sensed the closing of the gap between judicial systems across the border. Since the 80s with the Sino-British negotiations, Hongkongers have expressed anxiety over China's influence after the handover of 1997. These sentiments have formed the foundation of Hong Kong's universal suffrage movement, which accumulated much public support and generated robust civil society engagement. Public outrage is easily triggered when the rule of law, civil liberties, and human rights—principles that are supposedly protected—come under threat.

Human rights, freedom, and the rule of law have long been viewed in purely political terms. Thus, when those in power assert that the so-called “deeply embedded conflicts” are in fact economically based, those who support the movement are often quick to rebuke or denounce such a claim. However, even though the protests themselves might have been precipitated by formally political concerns, it does not mean that there were no other causes either. On 5 August 2019, the day of the general strike, our team of researchers conducted a questionnaire survey at three strike assembly locations. Based on survey data, we observed that participants were in fact deeply outraged by issues related to the economy and crises of livelihood (see Figure 1). 89.28% agreed or strongly agreed that working hours in Hong Kong are too long. 94.3% agreed or strongly agreed that the wealth disparity in Hong Kong is absurd, and 96.69% thought that the SAR government is too lenient towards large corporations and financiers.

In other words, strike participants actually held a consensus on the hallmark features of Hong Kong capitalism: long working hours, extreme wealth disparity, and overwhelming influence by large corporations. What warrants attention here is that, comparatively speaking, “only” 91.73% stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that Beijing was overly involved in Hong Kong affairs, which turned out to be slightly lower than the number of participants who attested to untenable working hours and unfettered corporate power. While the government has tried to point to the economy time and again as a way to shift attention away from political issues, it would be unreasonable to claim that protestors are apathetic about economic and livelihood issues.

Figure 1: *Opinions regarding the sentences below of those surveyed participating in the 5 August 2019 strike assemblies*

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Invalid Answer	
Beijing is overly involved in Hong Kong affairs.	442	249	56	6	2	2
Valid Answers (%)	58.54	32.98	7.42	0.79	0.26	
The SAR government has not protected the autonomy of the SAR.	542	176	17	9	11	2
Valid Answers (%)	71.79	23.31	2.25	1.19	1.46	
I believe that the SAR government frequently ignores public opinion.	649	102	4	0	0	2
Valid Answers (%)	85.96	13.51	0.53	0.00	0.00	
I believe that the SAR government is too lenient on large corporations.	529	201	23	2	0	2
Valid Answers (%)	70.07	26.62	3.05	0.26	0.00	
I believe that workers in Hong Kong have excessively long working hours.	396	279	77	3	1	1
Valid Answers (%)	52.38	36.90	10.19	0.40	0.13	

I believe that wealth disparity in Hong Kong society has reached an unreasonable level.	453	258	40	3	0	3
Valid Answers (%)	60.08	34.22	5.31	0.40	0.00	

It is clear that the public's dissatisfaction with existing economic inequities in fact plays a key role in pragmatic politics. Based on this, we can evaluate the contribution of the new union movement based on how effective labor activists have been in introducing economic issues into the agenda of the entire pro-democracy movement. In response to pro-democracy struggles, the Hong Kong government and the conservative camp often paint themselves as the sole productive contributors to prosperity in the city and the only force able to alleviate economic problems in people's everyday lives. According to this narrative, protests will only lead to economic deterioration in Hong Kong, which disproportionately harms the working class, who has the least amount of resources to respond to adversity. This argument is deeply flawed, as those with the power to govern Hong Kong largely come from the capitalist upper class. Expecting the pro-establishment camp to combat economic inequities would therefore be a fool's errand. Still, the opposition would not be able to consolidate their base if they continue to focus solely on narrow political issues.

In defense of an 'original Hong Kong': Challenges in centering economic oppression

We have reason to believe that the working class is a minority in the movement. Figures 2 and 3 below respectively display the monthly income and education level of participants from our questionnaire on the strike assembly. According to [data](#) from the Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong's monthly individual median income in the 3rd quarter of 2019 was \$17,300. However, among the participants in the questionnaire, 72.29% rake in more than that dollar amount. 81.85% of participants has also received higher education. It is evident that the monthly income and education level of participants in the strike were higher than average. Yet, as Figure 1 suggests, despite their class background, strike participants were still dissatisfied with economic inequality in Hong Kong. Why is it that despite evident outrage among protestors about economic inequality, class and economic issues have never been centered in Hong Kong's recent large-scale movements?

Sociologist Charles D. Brockett has [noted](#) that the construction of a collective identity during mobilization plays a key role in determining whether individual outrage can morph into collective action. Furthermore, despite increasing tension between mainstream or traditional pan-democrats and localists, the two groups share a common lineage. From advocating for liberal democratic resistance (撐民主) against the Chinese Communist Party as early as in the 80s, to promoting stark separation between Hong Kong and mainland China (港獨), both approaches stem from the idea that one must protect Hong Kong in its initial, pristine state against the "authoritarian" and "backward" advances of mainland China. Discrimination against mainland Chinese immigrants and the ideology of Hong Kong independence are simply two manifestations of a more radical version of the pan-democratic discourse. The fierce sense of Hong Kong identification we witness in recent movements is built upon this imaginary of an idyllic, untainted Hong Kong, and the accompanying anxiety about its imminent demise.

Figure 2: The personal median income in July 2019 of participants in the strike assembly

	No Personal Income	< or = \$12,600	\$12,600-\$17,500	\$17,500-\$27,200	\$27,200-\$40,000	>\$40,000	Invalid Answers
Count	17	54	133	214	155	163	21

Valid							
Answers	2.31	7.34	18.07	29.08	21.06	22.15	
(%)							

Figure 3: Highest educational attainment of participants in the strike assembly

	Elementary School or Below	Completed elementary schooling, but not secondary	Secondary school graduate	HKDSE	Tertiary education, non-bachelor's	Bachelor's degree	Postgraduate	NA
Count	2	8	93	32	141	336	132	13
Valid								
Answers	0.27	1.08	12.50	4.30	18.95	45.16	17.74	
(%)								

We do not deny the validity of these sentiments. But precisely because Hong Kong's movements have given rise to this specific collective identity, it has been exceedingly difficult for economic inequity under Hong Kong-style capitalism to come to the fore of any mobilization. For example, during the pandemic, the Housing Authority went against the market and hiked up the rent by nearly 10%. In addition, while the government released the Employment Support Scheme to provide economic relief to employers, they did not provide unemployment welfare support to workers. Though many have criticized these policies for not protecting the citizenry's livelihood, such commentary ultimately gained little traction on social media and within activist circles. Taking into account the number of people affected by these policies, the political energy that can be unleashed by reactions to these two measures alone would have been significant, as up to 780,000 Hongkongers currently live in public housing, and as many as 240,000 were unemployed. Yet, in the end, though both policies were the products of the existing economic structure and have caused a fair amount of public disgruntlement, neither secured a spot on the movement's overarching agenda. As a result, many were left to struggle under heavy economic burden on their own.

We cannot have the last word in this conundrum, but we do wonder if identification as a Hongkonger has come to entail an acceptance—or at least tolerance—towards Hong Kong's existing capitalist system in reality. If the entire movement is seen solely through the lens of identity politics, we will inevitably overlook the interconnectedness among political and economic factors. As a result, we will remain ignorant of the havoc wreaked by capitalism.

From strictly political mobilization to workplace organizing

The new union movement is still in its nascent stages. However, it has already successfully expanded the general movement's reach to challenging oppression in the workplace. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance [organized a strike](#) to pressure the government into tightening Hong Kong's border to control imported cases. Although the union's action was not able to urge a change in policy, this strike prompted a significant number of citizens to pay attention to the circumstances faced by frontline medical workers, such as the distribution and provision of medical supplies and personal protective equipment. The new union movement, hence, has at least been successful in sparking public discussion on resource distribution, workplace treatment, and labor conditions, injecting a new impetus to the movement.

However, it also faces many challenges. We can only briefly outline two points in this article that have not been discussed enough. The first difficulty the movement must overcome is a common

tendency exhibited in past mainstream movements: movements often ran out of steam as soon as they reached their apex. The second challenge is our tendency to evaluate the outcome of movements through a narrow set of criteria, which sometimes effaced hard-earned accomplishments.

Political scientist Karen Beckwith conducted research on the labor movement in the UK during the wave of privatizations in the 1980s. She [presented](#) an interesting argument: if we evaluate the 1984-1985 British miners' strike through a short-term perspective that focused only on the immediate, we would undoubtedly see it as a failure, since the Thatcher administration, despite workers' protests, ultimately privatized the coal mining industry. However, this struggle helped British coal miners and their families to acquire important social movement resources, such as organizing tactics and the cultivation of social networks. By 1992, they were able to put this to use, and successfully organized a trans-regional coalition against further plans of privatization. As Beckwith concluded: "Losses in a social movement campaign and its impact upon future chances of remobilization may be determined more decisively by the collective experience of the campaign, the framing of failure by participants, and the identity that binds organizers together."

There are two points in Beckwith's research that we must seriously consider. First, a failed movement does not represent the end of social change. Rather, it is only the beginning of another movement—the key being that we must organize and regroup at our lowest point. Second, we must view social change through a longer time frame. For example, after the Umbrella Movement in 2014, many believed that social movements in Hong Kong were waning. At the time, few would have predicted that in 2019 we would witness the biggest wave of resistance since 1997. When many dismissed post-Umbrella community organizing with apathy, who would've predicted that long-term organizing processes would reenter the field of action in 2019? Though 2014 ended in retreat, who would've thought that this "failed" experience of resistance served as invaluable education for the next generation?

This leads us to believe that the new union movement must not only involve strictly political mobilization but also everyday organizing. Looking at the entire lifespan of the protests, explosive conflict is but the apex of the cycle. Before then, there are many minute yet crucial matters to attend to, such as building internal coherence and empowering the organization's rank-and-file to avoid infighting and solidify capacity to deal with divisive and abusive relations of power. From this view, the new union movement, for one, can be seen as a "post-Umbrella community 2.0 (後雨傘 2.0)." When the political climate presents unexpected developments, what protestors need may not be a constant, exponential escalation of actions (不斷升級), but rather a penchant for nimble adaptation and gradual, long-term organizing. As our questionnaire data has illustrated plainly, those who participated in the struggle have in fact been immensely dissatisfied with Hong Kong's political and economic situation; this provides fertile ground for grassroots organizing that would allow activists to explore and solidify the outcomes of last year's movement.

It is undeniably important for us to find alternative paths of resistance given Hong Kong movements' past focus on strictly political mobilization. A number of organizations have been adept at using social and mass media to mobilize and exert pressure on the government. The benefit of using media as leverage is that many organizations can sidestep the protracted nature of organizing. Though the number of those involved may not be impressive, the influence of media exposure can be powerful, and can at times direct public opinion. The drawback is that, perhaps due to a lack of organizational experience, the organization in question often has difficulty galvanizing and integrating new members after experiencing conflict. At best, new members may lack a sense of belonging within the organization, and eventually fade out. At worst, existing members may begin to split amongst themselves due to political disagreement: some may begin to find the organization's everyday operations incongruent with their politics. Still, key organizers may propose new action items to

garner the support of new members. All in all, it is not difficult to understand why there are constantly new issues for debate popping up in Hong Kong's social movements, and why rarely any of them manage to sustain the public's attention in the long run.

We do not believe that there is a single successful way to cultivate a strong, united membership. On the contrary, this is contingent upon the needs of specific industries. Navigating everyday operations, however, remains a key question that the new union movement must tackle. The data we collected from the strike can only show us the bottom line: that many citizens who participated in the strike were fed up with the bleak reality of Hong Kong life under capitalism. However, it remains to be seen how organizers in the new union movement would take this as a point of entry to expand membership and build power.

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