

Hong Kong's mass arrests are an assault on grassroots advocacy

Friday 8 January 2021, by [SHARON YAM Shui-Yin](#), [X.L. Hung](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2021).

The fight for political freedom and grassroots social justice are inextricable

On 6 January 2021, the Hong Kong Police Force [arrested](#) over 50 pro-democracy politicians and activists for running in the Legislative Council (LegCo) [democratic primary election](#) under the National Security Law.

The primary, held in July 2020, mobilized a record turnout of over 600,000 voters to express their preferences for pro-democratic politicians among the traditional pan-democratic and localist camps. It was meant for the public to choose a slate of pro-democratic candidates most likely to win in the LegCo election scheduled for November 2020, though it was ultimately postponed by the Hong Kong government under the pretense of coronavirus fears.

Almost every candidate in the primary, including both established and younger opposition figures, were arrested. Their intent to secure a legislative majority to vote down the Hong Kong annual budget plan was deemed “subversive” under the National Security Law. The police also presented search warrants at independent news outlets and the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, which conducted polling for the election.

Following Beijing's [disqualification](#) of four incumbent lawmakers in November 2020 that led to the [mass resignation](#) of pro-democratic legislative councillors, this suggests an end to an effective political opposition in the city's legislature.

This outrageous wave of arrest cements the government's intent to stifle and criminalize all dissent. It implies that the government's removal of its parliamentary opposition has expanded to a full assault on Hong Kong's civil society, including targeted arrests on academics, researchers, labor organizers, and advocates of social justice for marginalized communities.

While the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement has often emphasized dual universal suffrage—the right to directly elect the Chief Executive and the entire legislature—as one of its core demands, the movement encompasses interconnected social justice issues. Among the 53 people arrested, several were seasoned activists and organizers fighting for labor, migrant, racial, and disability justice.

[Jeffrey Andrews](#), a democratic primary candidate who was arrested, was both the first social worker of Indian descent in the city, and the [first person of a non-white ethnic minority](#) to run for LegCo. As a senior social worker at the Center for Refugees, a drop-in community center for asylum seekers, Andrews wanted to represent the rights of ethnic minorities from within the institution. [Chi-yung Lee](#), another arrested primary candidate, joined the race because he wanted to advocate for [disability justice](#). As a caretaker of a severely disabled daughter, Lee advocated for more accessible public transportation and city planning.

Similarly, prominent pro-democracy figure Eddie Chu Hoi-dick, who was also arrested, has long

been advocating for the rights of [immigrant detainees](#) and [migrant domestic workers](#) along with demands for electoral democracy. For Andrews, Lee, and Chu, securing seats in the LegCo was not merely about challenging Beijing's rule, but also about advocating for marginalized groups in Hong Kong whose experiences and needs were often ignored in favor of corporations and those in power.

The mass arrest of these lawmakers shatters the illusion that democratic candidates who were not previously disqualified could present a legislative challenge to [the government's plan](#) to distribute billions in HKD to the Hong Kong Police Force, alongside "white elephant projects" like the [Lantau Tomorrow Vision](#) that cede ground to property developers' interests and exacerbate environmental devastation.

Among the arrested democratic primary candidates were also union leaders like [Carol Ng](#) and [Winnie Yu](#), respectively the chairperson of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), and the founder and chairperson of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (HKEA).

The [new union movement](#) in Hong Kong, emerging from [attempts](#) to coordinate general strikes and seek parliamentary representation in the LegCo's functional constituencies, sought to extend movement energy through sharing information, building worker solidarity, and conducting industrial actions such as [the medical workers' strike](#) in February 2020. Yu was herself featured in "[Medical Workers' Unions—Movement Building from US to HK](#)," a webinar organized by Lausan in late June to facilitate exchange and learning between labor activists in the United States and Hong Kong.

The new union movement connects the demand for democracy with economic struggles, making clear that the pro-democracy movement cannot be separated from the capitalist material conditions that perpetuate class inequity in Hong Kong. As Leo Tang, a labor organizer from HKCTU, noted in a [letter from prison](#), the new union movement connects labor rights with political demands and "unearths the potential to sustain the movement through the transformation of relations." Ng and Yu's arrests signal an affront from the Hong Kong government towards the new union movement, which has been effectively building power from the ground up.

While undoubtedly another crushing setback, the redrawn fronts of struggle may yet unearth [novel forms of resistance](#). Can the movement energy in legislative activism be redirected towards direct action? Can the intensifying persecution of activist leaders compel ordinary folk to organize and advocate for their own communities? How do we connect with other movements and communities, in the interlinked arena of [transnational struggle](#)?

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