

Interview from a member of Left21: 10 things you need to know about the protests in Hong Kong

Thursday 2 October 2014, by [CHAN Sophia](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2014).

The pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong continue. Demonstrators have set a deadline of midnight tonight for Hong Kong's Chief Executive to resign. German revolutionary group Marx21 interviewed Sophia Chan from Left21, Hong Kong about the background to and prospects for the mass protests taking place. [1].

1. When did the protests start and why? What was the turning that meant people started to demonstrate?

Sophia Chan – The protest was actually a result of a long battle for democracy. When the British handed Hong Kong back over to China in 1997, the Chinese government promised both in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the mini constitution of Hong Kong (the Basic Law) that a democratic system eventually would be implemented in Hong Kong. After decades of delay and making excuses, in August this year the National People's Congress of the PRC declared that the so-called democracy that Hong Kong would have is a system where Beijing will basically vet 2-3 candidates for voters to choose from. Also, the candidates would have to gain at more than 50% of nominations from a tiny electoral committee of 1,200 people, most of whom are representatives of business interests in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) began organising a student strike that started on 22 September. More than 13,000 university students boycotted classes and joined the strike. On 26 September, around 1500 secondary school students also joined the strike. During the strike, university professors held public lectures in the open area outside the Hong Kong government HQ and parliament.

On the last day of the strike, HKFS students and members of the public stormed past police barricades to reclaim a public area in front of the government HQ called 'Civic Square', which had been sealed off arbitrarily. The police used pepper spray and 3 key student leaders were arrested and illegally detained. This prompted thousands of citizens to come out and protest, demanding the release of the students. In the early hours of 27 September, the civil disobedience campaign 'Occupy Central' (OCLP) was launched.

The next day, tens of thousands of people poured into the street and started occupying main roads in Admiralty and Wan Chai. The police began to use pepper spray and later, tear gas. The violence outraged people in Hong Kong and up to 100,000 people came out on 29 September. Since then, the police have held back and the occupation has been going on, with as many as 200,000 people

occupying four zones across the city in the peak times.

2. How have the protests developed? Why are they occupying the Central (financial) district?

The occupation of Central was conceived last year by a university professor called Benny Tai. Central was chosen because it is symbolic as the heart of Hong Kong. Most important businesses have their HQ there, and the old government HQ, as well as former parliament are there. More importantly, OCLP thought that occupying Central would be the best way to produce such disruption that the government would have to listen to people's demands.

However, in the end, it was the HKFS (Hong Kong Federation of Students) who prompted the early launch of the campaign with their action of storming the Civic Square. Currently, the two groups hold joint leadership in the movement.

3. Who are the protesters? Media coverage reports mainly students - is it a students protest only or do workers and people with other backgrounds participate as well?

It was mostly students to begin with, but since 28 September when tear gas was used many people came out in support. Now it's not only students, but people of many different backgrounds. In occupied Mong Kok, a more grassroots district, many people from the working class have come out. On Hong Kong island, it's mostly students and white collar employees. Academics also have a big presence.

4. Who's behind the protests? Are they spontaneous/grassroots or planned and organised? Are there any organisations like unions and political groups behind the protests?

Although HKFS and OCLP played important planning roles, and HKFS undoubtedly initiated the action that prompted the protest, it is widely recognised now that most people who are occupying came out themselves, and have organised themselves into different teams and groups in the occupied zones. There is very little presence of a 'leader' of any kind right now.

Political parties generally play a supporting role, but the movement is very sensitive towards any attempt by political parties to claim leadership to the movement, so the parties are mainly only giving us material and media support.

5. How are the demonstrations and occupations organised? Are they preparing for a longer occupations? What kind of grassroots initiatives are developing in the protests?

Most protestors are prepared for longer occupation - cleaning teams, supply stations and first aid stations etc have been set up to enable better environments. However, the movement might escalate tomorrow, because the HKFS has issued an ultimatum to the government - either the Chief Executive resigns by tonight or the protest will extend to surrounding government buildings. We're not sure how the police will respond to that if it does happen.

Grassroots initiatives are definitely developing - for example, we now have groups of people spontaneously sitting together to form people's assemblies where each person take turns to talk into a mic, sharing their thoughts on the situation and the future of HK. Each person is allocated 5 mins, and if someone tries to hoard the mic, the rest of the group will nicely tell him to pass it on. Also, teams of volunteers have formed to talk to shop owners around occupied areas, to see what they think of the movement and to obtain their sympathies for the movement as it is causing them inconvenience. Furthermore, democracy walls have sprung up everywhere - on the side of buses, on random walls and pillars, people have written messages and plasted them everywhere. Lastly,

anyone can be a volunteer of some kind as long as they are willing to – there is very little hierarchy on the ground.

6. What are the main demands? International coverage names free elections – are there any other demands?

The main demands are : free elections, the resignation of CY Leung, the Chief Executive, and the resignation of the Police Chief, Tsang Wai-hung. The movement has been quite united so far in these demands, and no other demand has been made vocal.

7. Is there a left/progressive wing in Hong Kong? Is it playing a role within the movement?

Left 21 represents the left wing in Hong Kong. We are playing the role of coalition building and assistance. We have built a coalition of grassroots organisations and trade unions in support of the movement. On 29 September, the day after tear gas was used, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions declared a general strike, and several unions including the Swire Beverages Factory workers responded by going on strike for a day. Our coalition now consists of 17 organisations, and we have been helping with coordinating the management of the occupied zones.

8. What's the left emphasising? What are demands are you pushing for?

In this democratic movement, we have been trying to push the economic and labour side. We've been doing this by 1) organising public talks on the ground for protestors; 2) trying to bring out the capitalist dimension of Hong Kong's political problems in our articles and other materials; 3) building a local labour and grassroots coalition with the democratic movement; 4) we've also managed to get the support of various trade unions around the world, such as the UK National Union of Teachers, which released a statement today in solidarity with Hong Kong.

As for our demands, we see free elections as a major blow to business-government collusion and capitalist privilege, because currently half of the seats in the parliament of Hong Kong ('Legislative Council') reserved for 'functional constituencies, which basically mean that certain economic sectors (such as finance) in Hong Kong are guaranteed a seat in the parliament. When we fight for policies such as the minimum wage or a standard labour law, it is almost always those members of parliament who block the bill. Also, the electoral committee for the Chief Executive election as proposed by Beijing would consist of 1,200 representatives, almost all of whom belong to business sectors such as real estate, banking, etc. Beijing has explicitly declared that this is to protect the interests of capitalists.

As such, although we do think that a democratic political system is only the first step to real change, we also think that that in itself would already be a huge improvement for our fight against capitalist oppression in Hong Kong. Of course, we do also try to spread the idea that even if we obtain free elections, we would still battle against tycoons and capitalists.

9. Do you expect Chinese authorities to react peacefully or with brute force? How do you predict the movement will react?

Unless the movement escalates to a point where people start challenging the idea of 'one country', we don't think Beijing will deploy its army against Hong Kong, as the price both internationally and locally would be too high. So far, only a very small and marginalised minority (mainly right wing groups who don't like mainland Chinese immigrants) have called for independence, so the situation is under control.

We predict that the Hong Kong government will eventually open communication with HKFS and the

political parties, but where this might lead is too early to say. The people are very sensitive about compromises made by groups that claim to be leading the movement, so this may lead to a huge public backlash.

10. What do you think will happen in the future? Is there a chance the protests will carry the day? What will happen if so, or if they don't?

We don't think the government will allow the protest to carry on indefinitely because the occupation is spreading quickly across Hong Kong. However, there has been a lot of smearing of the movement by the pro-government media, which emphasises the inconveniences brought to other residents, as well as the negative economic impact of the movement. Thus we think that this is a battle for public sympathy - if we lose sympathy, the police would have strong grounds to clear the occupation.

P.S.

* <http://rs21.org.uk/2014/10/02/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-protests-in-hong-kong/>

Footnotes

[1] The interview is available in German here: <http://marx21.de/hongkong/>