

Blind spots? Hong Kong's protest movement must stop ignoring migrant workers

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The city's migrant workforce could bolster the protests significantly, but their demands are not being heard.

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On 5 August, over 350,000 workers took part in Hong Kong's first general strike in generations. Flights were cancelled en masse and the city's transportation system was thrown into chaos. The strike was the culmination of weeks of protests against proposed amendments to Hong Kong's extradition laws, which would grant the chief executive unprecedented power to dictate extradition decisions and bypass the legislative council. It was an impressive display of solidarity between workers and students, and an important step forward in the city's recent string of mass mobilisations. However, unusually for a general strike, there were no explicit demands around labour conditions. The drive for autonomy from China has mobilised millions of people on the street but, as the strike revealed, there are avenues for solidarity which the movement is overlooking.

Migrant domestic workers from Southeast Asia occupy a unique, but rather neglected, position in the city's current struggle. Almost 400,000 migrant workers (more than the size of the general strike), mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia, work for extremely low wages in Hong Kong. Most come to the city to seek better jobs, but almost 80% are in debt and beholden to the exploitative practices of recruitment agencies. According to a recent [report](#), migrant workers contribute more than \$12 million to Hong Kong's economy.

Many of these workers are [supportive](#) of the protests, and migrant unions, some of which are affiliated with the pro-democracy Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), have strongly encouraged their members to get out on the streets. But various pressures limit their participation and protest demands have not directly addressed their material concerns. Some are compelled not to participate in fear of their work visas being revoked; the [Philippines consulate has sent out notices](#) discouraging migrant workers from participating in the protests. Clarisse*, a Filipino migrant worker, says that many employers disapprove of their participation in the protests, and some have even prevented them from taking their legally mandated rest day. In addition, she points out that the

areas where migrants usually congregate have become key sites for clashes between the police and the protestors.

One message threatened to attack Nepalis, Indians, and Pakistanis if they participate in the protests.

Fake government notices, and even death threats, have been anonymously circulating in migrant workers' social media platforms like WeChat and Whatsapp, according to Fish Ip, the regional coordinator for International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). One message specifically threatened to attack Nepalis, Indians, and Pakistanis if they participate in the protests, many of whom are not even domestic workers, showing how different racial minorities in Hong Kong are conflated and targeted. Reports of the Hong Kong police harassing and [arresting](#) a Filipino dancer on the eve of the general strike further exacerbated these fears. Other threats were framed as retaliatory stemming from [rumours](#) that some ethnic minorities were involved in the attacks on protestors in Yuen Long.

Widespread indifference to migrants

Hong Kong is still considered a better place to work and organise than other major hubs for migrant workers like Dubai, despite lacking many basic employment [rights](#). Jo Han, a Filipino who has worked in Hong Kong since 1996, fears that the extradition bill would open the way for policies that would further affect both migrants and locals alike. Above all, she worries that the right to unionise and freedom of assembly would be jeopardised. Han was told by the Philippines consulate that the demonstrations are not a concern for domestic workers. But Clarisse rejects this stance, "We are living and working in Hong Kong, this is our second home and whatever happens we will be affected."

There is widespread indifference to the plight of migrant workers in Hong Kong, their voices have largely been ignored by both the pro-Democracy movement and the government. In spite of this, [interviews with migrant workers](#) demonstrate the complex ways in which migrants do see Hong Kong as a home away from home. And a recent [report](#) shows that migrant domestic workers enable more East Asian women (especially mothers) to participate in the workforce. In other words, migrants, despite their limited participation, already play a central role in the demonstrations: their work enables more families to be involved.

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While the protests have afforded an opportunity for the general populace to renegotiate their understanding of the city's structural issues, migrant workers rights have remained a blindspot. For example, the increasing distrust of policing is a new and critical step toward radicalisation. But the silence towards migrant workers' conditions reveals a persistent weakness in the protestors' demands: the inability to recognise that Hong Kong's woes are deeply tied to a globalised economy of exploitation, and the structural effects of colonisation in new forms.

Sring Atin, a domestic worker and member of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Alliance (IMWA) who is generally supportive of the protests, says that the movement's demands do not concretely address

migrants' issues. The fight against the new extradition policies, which she sees as the prime focus of the mobilisations, must "bring in workers' demands to ensure quality and decent working conditions for the most marginalised communities."

The myopia around this issue reveals the exclusionary, xenophobic sentiments that are often constitutive of localist ideologies. A sense of ethnonationalism tied to 'Hong Kong identity' has been inseparable from many localist groups such as Hong Kong Indigenous, who promote blatantly uncritical xenophobia against the Mainland Chinese as a whole. This exclusionary sentiment manifests more subtly and variously when it comes to migrant workers, whose issues are seen as auxiliary to Hong Kong's struggles.

Class and race: the movement's blind spots?

Hong Kong is wedged between a geopolitical struggle between China and the US. Wilfred Chan asks in [Dissent](#) what it would mean for the city to "reimagine an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian politics of survival from the perspective of this in-between place?" The answer lies in the city's working-class movements and will require imagining new coalitions. The potential for a transnational anti-capitalist politics is already here, in a city where migrants and locals rub shoulders on every other block contesting Hong Kong's identity as a global financial hub.

However, ethnic divisions in the protest movement prevent a deeper understanding of the colonial heritage of the city's labour economy and institutional structures. It is Southeast Asian women domestic laborers who bear many of the effects of Hong Kong's incomplete process of decolonisation. The city has a long history of gender-specific exploitative labour practices: for example, during the colonial period, affluent families often relied on [mui tsais](#), unpaid or underpaid Chinese female domestic labourers.

Today, diasporic Southeast Asian women, pushed out of their countries because of factors like gender and economic inequality in their home countries, continue to do essential care work. Migration scholar Rhacel Parreñas describes this as the "international division of reproductive labour". She writes in her book 'Servants of Globalization':

"In both sending and receiving countries, most women have not achieved a gender-egalitarian division of household work; instead, they have used their race and/or class privilege to transfer their reproductive labor with responsibilities to less privileged women."

Despite the fact that migrants and transnational networks have shaped the city's cultural identity, an uncritical and exclusionary idea of belonging continues to reinforce racial divides. A radical movement that truly can challenge the city's deep injustices must go beyond demands for universal suffrage, and build links between different marginalised groups.

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To highlight migrant workers' demands would not be a distraction from Chinese authoritarianism. On the contrary, it forces us to look at labour in all its complex dynamics - both within and beyond post-colonial Hong Kong. Why are wages so low for Southeast Asian women workers in Hong Kong,

and even lower in their home countries? How are the governments of Hong Kong and China complicit or actively facilitating this network of oppression? How accessible are the protests to marginalised identities? These are the questions that the protestors must reckon with if they want liberation and democracy for *all* of Hong Kong.

Migrant unions and organisations have played an important in foregrounding these issues. But while they have had victories throughout the years, they have not been able to mobilise a mass movement in solidarity against neoliberal globalisation. Their demands to make the current protests more inclusive poses a challenge to the movement. As a recent [petition](#) by self-organised housewives in support of the protests suggests, domestic care labour is not only legitimate work, but the kind that establishes the conditions for widespread struggle.

Who is included in the “我” (*myself*) of the protestors’ chant: “我一人救自己” (*We alone will save our own Hong Kong*)? What happens to our activism and analysis when some of the “我” include diasporic identities that are as local as they are transnational? These questions are not merely academic and speculative: they determine the concrete limits of Hong Kong’s struggle for liberation.

Combatting all kinds of oppression in Hong Kong under Chinese authoritarian capitalism must entail unpacking Han chauvinism, Hong Kong ethnonationalism, and other exclusionary ideologies. And to combat China’s colonial ambitions, we must look inward: freedom lies not only in the vanguard in the black masks, but also in the many who are absent from the front lines. We need to rethink who is included in the local, and how the local is tied to the transnational. For Hong Kong, a critical link to the global, grassroots fight against capital, are its migrant workers.

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P.S.

• Open Democracy. 23 August 2019:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/hong-kongs-protest-movement-must-stop-ignoring-migrant-workers/>