

Why Leftists Should Support Hong Kong's Fight for Democratic Rights

An interview with Eli Friedman by Ashley Smith

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In Hong Kong, leftists of all kinds support ongoing protests for democracy and civil liberties. Leftists everywhere else should, too.

For the last six months, the people of Hong Kong have risen up to defend their democratic rights against the encroachment of the Chinese state. Their fight has been met with brutal police repression ordered by Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, under pressure from Beijing.

After waves of demonstrations, people turned out at the polls in record numbers at the end of November to vote out regime-backed candidates in favor of pro-democracy parties, who won more than 80 percent of the seats. Labor scholar Eli Friedman was in Hong Kong in the lead-up to the election. Ashley Smith interviewed him about the movement, the challenges it faces, and the reasons why the international left should stand in solidarity with it.

Ashley Smith : You were just in Hong Kong during the election, which the candidates supporting democracy won by large numbers.

What's the significance of the results? What has been the response by the state in Hong Kong and Beijing?

Eli Friedman :

The recent district council elections resulted in a landslide victory for the pro-democracy parties, which is a big setback for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government and the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP). While many in Hong Kong were expecting gains in light of the government's brutal and incompetent response to the past six months of social resistance, they did even better than anticipated. Beijing seems to have been caught particularly flat-footed.

There are a few things worth clarifying about these elections. District councils are the lowest level of government in Hong Kong, and the only level that is fully democratically elected (only a portion of the legislature is directly elected, and the chief executive is elected by a committee consisting of 1,200 members). The councils maintain little power and are largely responsible for neighborhood upkeep issues.

Nonetheless, the elections are hugely significant for at least two reasons. First, chief executive Carrie Lam and her backers in Beijing have contended that they have the support of a "silent majority" of Hong Kong residents who are angered by the protests. This election irrefutably shows that narrative to be false — while there is certainly not yet consensus on what Hong Kong's future should look like, this vote reflects the widespread dissatisfaction with the current regime.

Second, district council members have a say in the election of the chief executive (CE). This has the potential to destabilize the established coalitions that have elected the CE previously, although there

isn't reason yet to believe that this will result in a better outcome.

The reaction from the government has not been heartening. Carrie Lam said she would "seriously reflect," a sentiment that she has expressed earlier, but which has not had any demonstrable impact on her actions. China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, responded to reporters with a boilerplate "Hong Kong is part of China" — indeed, that the CCP equates any opposition to their rule with separatism is telling.

Official media hinted, without evidence, that the United States or other foreign elements had interfered in the elections. It thus seems likely that the CCP either genuinely believes the movement is being organized by hostile foreign forces intent on fomenting independence, or that they are cynically promoting this account to divert from their own failings. Regardless, since they are now boxed in by this narrative, the only political response they are left with, given the Party's internal political dynamics, is repression without concessions.

For months, people in Hong Kong have protested in mass numbers, AS and now they have swept the elections. What have been the core demands the movement has fought for? And what is the state of the movement now?

Eli Friedman :

The five demands of the movement are:

- 1) full withdrawal of the anti- extradition bill;
- 2) withdrawal of the "riot" characterization of a June protest;
- 3) full amnesty for arrested protestors;
- 4) an independent investigation of police conduct;
- 5) real universal suffrage.

The first demand has now been met. This bill would have allowed Hong Kong authorities to extradite people to China, leading many activists and others to fear that they would be subject to non-transparent legal proceedings that characterize the CCP-controlled courts.

Opposition to this bill was the original catalyst for the movement, and many believe that if the bill had been withdrawn in June, the protests would have died down. Unfortunately for the government, their ham-fisted response and brutal repression by the police generated more demands, such that by the time the bill was finally withdrawn in September, people were hardly impressed.

There are many currents and diverse political perspectives within the movement, but the issue of police brutality has become increasingly prominent as months of violent repression have dragged on. "Real universal suffrage," i.e., direct election of freely nominated candidates, is a widely held aspiration, but one that most acknowledge will be a long and hard fight.

It seems unlikely that the high intensity of mobilization and confrontation with the police can persist much longer. Seasoned activists are making plans for a long- term struggle, one that will likely become less spectacular but perhaps equally important to Hong Kong's future. The fundamental conflict between the CCP's control imperative and Hong Kongers' rejection of full integration into China's legal and political system is not going away, but much more work needs to be accomplished in producing a positive vision of Hong Kong's future.

Recently the struggle has faced violent repression from the state, AS forcing student activists in particular to defend themselves. How has the broader population responded to this state violence? How will it impact popular protest?

Eli Friedman:

Many outside Hong Kong fail to grasp how important the issue of police violence is for the movement. Tear gas and rubber bullets rain down on protesters weekly, countless thousands have been indiscriminately clubbed by cops, and numerous women have been sexually assaulted while in detention.

Police even fired tear gas inside a subway station, provoking an extremely dangerous situation. Repression has also been outsourced to organized crime, the most terrifying example being the July 21 incident in suburban Yuen Long in which white-shirted thugs attacked commuters and protesters alike.

In response to heightening repression, as well as the government's complete indifference to mass marches, a not insignificant number of protesters have adopted increasingly militant tactics. This has included a limited number of examples of protesters physically attacking pro-regime counter-protestors. In one horrifying case, protesters doused someone in petrol and set him alight (he survived). One citizen died after getting hit by a brick thrown by a protestor.

But, by and large, people have adopted more militant tactics in self-defense. Perhaps the largest conflagrations of the movement have come at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Both universities saw students and other allied youth building barricades, hurling Molotov cocktails, and even shooting arrows to prevent police invasions of their campuses.

Much to the surprise of the authorities, there is widespread support or at least tolerance of these increasingly militant tactics. There is a deeply held sense that movement supporters should be tolerant of a diversity of tactics, and most rightly blame deteriorating public order on the police and the government. Direct action and self-defense in response to police violence has certainly been legitimated as the official mechanisms of political representation are viewed with deep suspicion.

One of the key questions that activists in Hong Kong face is whether AS this movement can mobilize the power of the working class. How rooted is it in Hong Kong? Has the movement been able to build links with the workers' struggles in China?

Eli Friedman:

Hong Kong's labor movement has historically been weak, and the post- 1997 government continued the anti-worker policies inherited from the British. Although Hong Kong does have freedom of association, there are no collective bargaining rights and a woefully inadequate minimum wage was only instituted in the last few years. The dominant union federation, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, is pro-regime and is actively hostile to the movement.

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) is aligned with the opposition and has worked to advance workers' rights in Hong Kong and Mainland China. But the HKCTU and its member unions still do not have the capacity to sustain robust political mobilization among the working class. This relative weakness has been on display amid recent calls for general strikes.

These strikes have been organized in the decentralized networks that characterize the movement more broadly. But unions have by and large been unable or unwilling to mobilize workplace-based support. The result has been a "general strike" without organizational capacity, which means that disruption has been focused on key nodes in the transportation infrastructure.

These tactics are worth supporting — but it would be much more politically potent if done in

coordination with workplace-based mobilization. Labor activists in the city are keenly aware of this issue, and are working hard at overcoming this weakness.

There are some encouraging signs that workers are being politicized in the midst of the general social uprising. Following intense pressure from Beijing, Cathay Pacific fired dozens of workers for their expressions of support of the movement, including flight attendant union chair Rebecca Sy. A campaign to get these workers reinstated was ultimately unsuccessful, but it did manage to implant the notion of “white terror” into the movement’s lexicon.

Workers in other industries have expressed interest in organizing — as much for political as economic reasons. One surprising example is the Financial Industry Employees General Union which “aims to unite fellow members in the financial- services sector to have a voice in important social topics.”

Major challenges remain for the working class to play a bigger role in shaping the orientation of the movement. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers remain quite peripheral in the political imagination. Raising economic demands has been complicated by the fact that pro-regime elements have claimed, incorrectly, that the protests are “really” about housing costs and that the political grievances are a distraction.

Hong Kong’s astonishing economic inequality is intrinsically linked to its oligarchic form of government, but lots of work needs to be done for this to become a central issue of the movement. Nostalgia associated with the colonial era is an outgrowth of understandable dissatisfaction with the present, but the territory’s past offers little in terms of a liberatory politics. Mobilizing around a new vision of a more democratic and equitable Hong Kong will be hard work.

This work is made all the more challenging by the fact that links with worker movements in Mainland China are basically nonexistent. Hong Kong activists have played a critical role in the development of worker organizations and insurgency in China over the past twenty-five years, but these links are badly attenuated today. This is due to the CCP’s unrelenting effort to smash independent forms of worker organization since 2015, including even the tamest NGOs. Receiving money or assistance from Hong Kong is in and of itself risky.

Of course, anti-Chinese sentiment in Hong Kong is a real issue and needs to be confronted, too. Some friends of mine brought posters of imprisoned Chinese labor activists to a protest in Hong Kong and reported receiving lots of inquiries and expressions of support. So, the situation is not totally hopeless for Hong Kong-Mainland solidarity, even if it is basically impossible at the moment.

That Hong Kong as an island of liberalism in a hostile sea of authoritarianism is neither normatively desirable nor practically viable. To put it provocatively, if Hong Kong cannot export “the revolution of our times” to the Mainland, it cannot succeed on its own terms.

There has been a debate on the US left about whether to support the AS uprising in Hong Kong. Some point to conservative elements in the movement that look to the US state for assistance to dismiss the movement as a cat’s-paw for Washington. What’s your view of these arguments, and how should the international left, and particularly the US left, position itself?

Eli Friedman:

The diffidence of the US and Western left on the movement is perplexing to many leftists in Hong Kong. Thus far, we’ve ceded terrain to anti-communists like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz who have

spoken
forcefully on the issue.

The Hong Kong left, from anarchists and community organizers to social democrats, is deeply involved in the movement. And the reason is simple: the CCP presides over an ethno-nationalist form of dictatorial state capitalism. Following the handover, the CCP decided to ally itself with the city's tycoons, allowing them to continue to enrich themselves within the territory and giving them special access to the Mainland in exchange for political allegiance.

Within China proper, workers, peasants, and ethnic minorities have been dealt with harshly when they have tried to defend or advance their rights. Marxist students in China are kidnapped, disappeared, and arrested. Practically any leftist in Hong Kong that has tried to work in China has been unable to continue with their work due to state repression.

Thus, the Hong Kong left has been quite actively involved in movements to preserve what remains of the city's liberal rights since at least 2003, when mass protests beat back the much-hated anti-subversion bill known as Article 23.

If the Hong Kong left is basically unanimous in its support for the movement, why has the US left wavered? It is indeed troubling to see protestors waving the American flag and thanking Marco Rubio on Twitter. Whether they truly believe the United States is a moral exemplar is debatable, but appealing to Donald Trump to support a movement for democracy, even if done totally instrumentally, is bad strategy at best.

But why should we allow the worst elements of a massive and incredibly diverse movement to represent the entirety of that movement? Should we withhold our support of the US labor movement because some union leaders are openly nationalist and xenophobic?

The basic aspirations of the movement in Hong Kong, as clearly articulated in the five demands, are opposition to police violence, preserving the legally mandated autonomy from the PRC legal system, and an expansion of democracy. If similar demands were formulated in the United States, we would support them.

Some may claim that electoral democracy and a bourgeois legal order will be of little benefit to the working class. That may be. But a capitalism where people are allowed to debate and organize politically is far better than a capitalism where similar activities will get you disappeared.

I think there is an additional unstated factor in US leftists' reluctance to speak forcefully on Hong Kong, which is that it does not fit neatly into inherited narratives. We know at an intuitive level what to feel when there's a military coup in Latin America. There is no question how the Left will respond to Israeli atrocities the next time they bomb Gaza.

But former British colonial subjects who are on average quite privileged by global standards hurling Molotovs at the representatives of a (nominally) socialist regime? It's confusing. Throw in some videos of black-clad protestors singing the Star-Spangled Banner, and it is understandable why it would lead to a mix of emotions.

China is an emergent empire, one that is fully incorporated into the basic capitalist practices of commodity production and exploitation of labor, but which is upending the centuries-old Euro-American imperial order. The decline of that old order is not, in and of itself, going to lead to an expansion of human freedom.

The struggle in Hong Kong reflects these massive structural shifts and will have a profound

influence on how a rising PRC responds to movements for autonomy and democracy elsewhere on its periphery and beyond. We should be doing everything we can to support and express solidarity with our comrades in Hong Kong, since they are in the fight with or without us.

About the author:

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About the interviewer:

Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including *Truthout*, *The International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker*, *ZNet*, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled *Socialism and Anti-Imperialism*.

P.S.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/hong-kong-protests-leftists-international-support>