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Hong Kong Protests: Why Imperialists Support ‘Democracy’ Movement

By Sara Flounders

October 08, 2014

.... Although using the name, street tactics and appeal of the **Occupy Wall Street** movement, **Occupy Central** has not made one demand on the banks in Hong Kong. In contrast, **Occupy Wall Street** was a movement that focused the outrage of tens of thousands of youth on the criminal role of the Wall Street banks, particularly in extracting from the U.S. government a trillion-dollar bailout that saved the largest banks while leaving millions of homes of working people in foreclosure, along with millions unemployed. In Hong Kong the role of the banks is enshrined in law for the next 50 years. How can this be overlooked? Understanding the special status of the former British colony of Hong Kong within China is a key part of understanding who **Occupy Central** represents.

Demonstrations in Hong Kong, China, raising demands on the procedures to be followed in city elections in 2017, have become an international issue and a source of political confusion.

The protests, called **Occupy Central**, have received enormous and very favorable U.S. media coverage. Every news report describes with great enthusiasm the occupation of central business parts of Hong Kong as “pro-democracy” protests. The demonstrations, which began on Sept. 22,

gained momentum after Hong Kong police used tear gas to open roads and government buildings.

In evaluating an emerging movement it is important to look at what political forces are supporting the movement. What are the demands raised by the movement, who are they appealing to, and what is the social composition of those in motion?

The U.S. and British governments have issued statements of support for the demonstrations. Secretary of State John Kerry urged Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to heed the demands of the protesters. Wang responded by calling for respect for China's sovereignty. Britain, which stole Hong Kong from China in 1842 and held it as a colony for 155 years under a government appointed by London, is supporting the call for "democracy" in Hong Kong. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg summoned the Chinese ambassador in order to convey the British government's alarm.

At the present time these imperialists may not expect to overturn the central role of the Chinese Communist Party in governing China. But Occupy Central in Hong Kong is a battering ram, aimed at weakening the role of the state in the Chinese economy.

The imperialists hope to embolden the bourgeois elements and encourage the increasingly strong capitalist class within China to become more aggressive and demand the overturn of socialist norms established after the 1949 socialist revolution, including the leading role of the Communist Party in a strong sovereign state.

Police repression: Mexico, Italy, Philippines

In Mexico, tens of thousands of students have been protesting curriculum changes and new fees. More than 50,000 demonstrated in Mexico City for the third time. In western Mexico, 57 students from a teaching college went missing after gunslingers fired on a demonstration they were attending, killing three students and wounding three others. A Guerrero official says witnesses identified the shooters as local police officers. Mass graves have now been uncovered in an area terrorized by police and gangs.

On Oct. 2, in Naples, Italy, national police attacked demonstrators protesting against austerity and a meeting of the European Central Bank. Cops fired tear gas and water canons at thousands of protesters.

Thousands of courageous demonstrators in Manila opposed the signing of an agreement with the U.S. for an escalating rotation of U.S. troops, ships and planes into the Philippines during President Obama's visit last April. They faced water cannons, tear gas and mass arrests.

Did any White House officials meet with Mexican officials to express concern for the killed or missing students? Did any British officials summon Italian officials to convey alarm at the tear gas and water cannons? Was there world media attention to the attacks on Philippine youth? Where was the media frenzy? Why is it so dramatically different regarding Occupy Central in Hong Kong?

The use of tear gas by Hong Kong police is denounced by the same officials who have been silent as militarized police in U.S. cities routinely use not only tear gas but tanks, armored personnel carriers, live ammunition, electric tasers, rubber bullets, stun guns, dogs and drones in routine police sweeps.

To hear U.S. officials denouncing restrictions on candidates in Hong Kong is especially offensive to anyone familiar with the election procedures in the U.S. today. Millions of dollars are required to run a campaign here. Candidates go through multiple layers of vetting by corporate powers and by the two pro-imperialist political party apparatuses. Restrictive ballot measures are in place in every state and city election.

‘Color revolutions’

Officials and publications in China characterize the actions of Occupy Central as a U.S.-funded “color revolution” and compare it to the upheavals that swept Ukraine and former Soviet republics.

Several commentaries have described in some detail the extensive role of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and the Democratic National Institute, along with corporate foundations’ funding of leaders and the protest movement in Hong Kong.

Thousands of nongovernmental organizations with large staffs are based in Hong Kong. Their stated goal is to build democracy. Their real purpose is to undermine the central role of the Chinese Communist Party in the organization of Chinese society. Hong Kong, unlike the rest of China, has allowed these U.S.-funded NGOs and political associations almost unlimited access for decades.

Hong Kong’s special status

Hong Kong’s importance is not due to its size. Its population of 7.5 million people is half of 1 percent of the population of China. But Hong Kong is a leading center of finance capital. According to the 2011 World Economic Forum, Hong Kong had already overtaken London, New York and Singapore in financial access, business environment, banking and financial services, institutional environment, nonbanking financial services and financial markets.

Hong Kong acts as the financial gateway to China. It has a guaranteed, banking-friendly, special administrative status. It is known for its financial services with insurance, law, accounting and many hundreds of well-established professional service firms. Capitalists based in Hong Kong are today the largest foreign investors in China.

The city of Hong Kong also has the greatest extremes of wealth and poverty in the world. The city is famous for glittering skyscrapers and luxury malls and is home to some of the world’s richest people. But half live in overcrowded and crumbling public housing. One-fifth live below the poverty line.

More than 170,000 “working poor” live in cage-like, subdivided flats. The stacked wire “dog crates” are 6 feet long by 3 feet high and wide, with 30 crates to a room. The city has no minimum wage.

Occupy?

Although using the name, street tactics and appeal of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Occupy Central has not made one demand on the banks in Hong Kong.

In contrast, Occupy Wall Street was a movement that focused the outrage of tens of thousands of youth on the criminal role of the Wall Street banks, particularly in extracting from the U.S. government a trillion-dollar bailout that saved the largest banks while leaving millions of homes of working people in foreclosure, along with millions unemployed.

In Hong Kong the role of the banks is enshrined in law for the next 50 years. How can this be overlooked? Understanding the special status of the former British colony of Hong Kong within China is a key part of understanding who Occupy Central represents.

Colonial status

Hong Kong, as a British colony from 1842 to 1997, had no elections nor any form of democracy. For 155 years its governors were appointed by Britain.

Hong Kong came into existence as a colony based on a series of unequal treaties imposed by British imperialism. Rather than pay in silver, Britain imposed the sale of opium into China in exchange for tea, spices, silk and porcelain, valuable trade items coveted in the West. The growing sale of opium was resisted by the Qing Dynasty, which confiscated more than 2 million pounds of opium in 1838.

British armored and steam-powered gunboats, in the name of “free trade,” opened fire on Chinese cities on the Pearl and Yangtze rivers, where bamboo, wood and thatch were common building materials. Cities and warehouses burst into flames. British forces seized the island of Hong Kong with its many natural harbors at the mouth of the vital Pearl River as a naval base and military staging point for future wars in China.

The 1842 Treaty of Nanking demanded China pay heavy indemnities and gave Britain and other foreign nationals a privileged position of extraterritoriality in China, along with ceding open treaty ports and turning over the Island of Hong Kong. Racist segregation of Chinese people was the practice in Hong Kong and all the “foreign concessions.”

In the Second Opium War 15 years later, British, French, U.S., Japanese and imperial Russian merchants made further demands, involving gunboats and thousands of troops. China was forced under duress to lease additional territory and open more cities. The demands continued. A 99-year lease for the islands surrounding Hong Kong, called the “new Territories,” was signed in 1898. China lapsed into a period of devastating famines, civil wars and contending warlords, with underdevelopment and great poverty for the great majority.

Revolution of 1949

The Chinese Revolution that culminated in 1949, under the revolutionary leadership of Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communist Party, ended the unequal treaties and the racist treatment of Chinese people in their own country and began the reorganization of the Chinese economy on a socialist basis.

But Hong Kong remained in British imperialist hands; Macau continued in the hands of old Portuguese colonialists; and on the island of Taiwan the defeated, reactionary Kuomintang regime led by dictator Chiang Kai-shek survived as a U.S. protectorate. The imperialist countries in the West and Japan denied technological and industrial development to the impoverished and underdeveloped People's China.

In the 1980s socialist China began opening to Western capitalist investment on a steadily expanding basis. The capitalist market in China and the influence of capitalist property relations have seriously eroded socialist ownership. But the centrality of the Communist Party in politics and the economy has not been broken.

Just as the imperialists 100 and 200 years ago sabotaged any restraint on their economic domination, today Wall Street continues scheming to regain unimpeded access to all of China's markets.

HKSAR: Special Administrative Region of China

In 1997, the 99-year British lease was scheduled to end on the British colony of Hong Kong. In 1984, China signed an agreement with Britain on the future status of Hong Kong. It was called the Hong Kong Basic Law.

In order to avoid instability and closing of the foreign investment flowing through Hong Kong, the Chinese government, while insisting on the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, agreed to guarantee capitalist relations there for 50 years under an agreement called "One Country, Two Systems," an idea originally proposed by Communist Party General Secretary Deng Xiaoping.

Hong Kong became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. In the agreement with British imperialism, the HKSAR would retain the status of an international financial center with free flow of capital. The Hong Kong dollar remained freely convertible.

The status of property rights, contracts, ownership of enterprises, rights of inheritance and foreign investment was all guaranteed. The agreement stipulated that Hong Kong's capitalist system itself and its "way of life" would remain unchanged until 2047. A network of private schools, universities and the large corporate media did not change hands. The Hong Kong Basic Law further stated that the socialist system and socialist policies would not be practiced in HKSAR.

Hong Kong bankers, financiers and industrialists were assured autonomy, except in foreign and defense affairs, where the People's Republic of China would have full say. It is this minimal control that Occupy Central is now challenging with the demand that Chief Executive Cy Leung must resign.

An antiquated judiciary based on British Common Law upholds the laws that defend the harshest private property relations. Small claims courts, landlord courts, labor courts, juvenile courts, coroner's courts and courts of appeals all enforce old capitalist laws, not the laws in place for the 99.5 percent living in the rest of China.

Hong Kong judges still wear British-style outfits, including wigs made of horsehair, with white gloves, girdles and scarlet robes added for official ceremonies.

The guarantee of unrestricted capitalism in Hong Kong for 50 years means that some of the starkest extremes of wealth and poverty exist side by side.

U.S. funded NGOs

Fearful of democratic change coming from the working class as soon as the British signed the agreement in 1984, the ruling class began to violate it, putting in place new political parties and organizations to operate after the return of the territory to China. After 145 years of appointed government, they pompously called for democratic change.

Three years before the 1997 handover of sovereignty, the British changed the constitution and set up district boards, urban and regional councils, and a legislative council. These top-down reforms were strongly opposed by the Chinese government as a violation of the agreement and a tactic to subvert its political system.

But more insidious than the official changes was the vast expansion of U.S. "soft power" in Hong Kong.

Today more than 30,000 NGOs are registered in Hong Kong. They cover every aspect of life. (Social Indicators of Hong Kong)

The U.S. funds NGOs for political subversion through the U.S. State Department's U.S. Agency for International Development, which makes grants to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), National Democratic Institute (NDI), National Republican Institute, Ford Foundation, Carter Center, Asia Foundation, Freedom House, Soros's Open Society and Human Rights Watch, among others.

All these groups and many more fund projects that claim to be supporting and promoting human rights, democracy, a free press and electoral reform. This funding of social networks operates for the same purposes in Latin America and the Caribbean, throughout the Middle East and Africa, and in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics.

U.S. imperialism has not established democracy in any of its hundreds of interventions, wars, drone attacks, coups or global surveillance. But “promoting democracy” has become a cover for attacks on the sovereignty of countries all around the world.

Of course, religious groups and other states, especially those in the European Union, also fund political associations and social networks in Hong Kong and everywhere across the globe. A few of these groups may genuinely operate independently and provide aid to immigrant workers, help low-paid workers organize, or address housing and health needs of the most unrepresented in Hong Kong. But for the most part, the NGOs are a network of “civil society” organizations controlled by and for U.S. corporate power.

A growing number of articles in the Chinese press have connected the dots of the leaders of Occupy Central and the U.S.-funded NGOs.

According to China.org.cn, “Each and every ‘Occupy Central’ leader is either directly linked to the U.S. State Department, NED, and NDI, or involved in one of NDI’s many schemes.” (Oct. 6)

Occupy Central’s self-proclaimed leader, Benny Tai, is a law professor who has received NDI and NED grants and was on the board of the NDI-funded Center for Comparative and Public Law. He attended many NDI-funded conferences. This is also true for another prominent Occupy Central figure, Audrey Eu.

Also, according to China.org.cn, “Martin Lee, founding chairman of Hong Kong’s Democrat Party, is another prominent figure who has come out in support of Occupy Central. Just this year, Lee was in Washington meeting directly with Vice President Joseph Biden and Rep. Nancy Pelosi and even took part in an NED talk hosted specifically for him and his agenda of “democracy” in Hong Kong. Lee even has a NED page dedicated to him after he was awarded NED’s Democracy Award in 1997. With him in Washington was Anson Chan, another prominent figure currently supporting the ongoing unrest in Hong Kong’s streets.”

A number of publications in the West are picking up on these exposés, including Counterpunch in “Hong Kong and the Democracy Question”; Global Research in “U.S. Now Admits It Is Funding Occupy Central in Hong Kong”; and InfoWars.com in “Is the U.S. Secretly Egging on Hong Kong Protesters?”

Even a Hong Kong poll showed that most of those making \$10,000 a year or less opposed the protests, while support was highest among people making \$100,000 a year or more.

Wall Street is not satisfied with the deep inroads that capitalism has made into China and is increasingly fearful of Chinese competition in global markets. The U.S. pressure for political liberalization in China is to promote further economic opening and further privatization of state industries.

U.S. and British imperialism hope to use Hong Kong as they did 150 years ago as a stronghold for pushing deeper politically into China. Today, however, they are not facing a backward feudal dynasty.

As U.S. corporate dominance in production and finance slips, the Asia pivot of the Obama administration means that the U.S. ruling class and its military apparatus has made the decision to become more confrontational toward Russia and China.

Opponents of U.S. wars and organizations defending workers' interests in the U.S. can play an important role by refusing to align with U.S. schemes aimed at overturning pro-socialist norms inside China and undermining Chinese sovereignty.