

Situating the Hong Kong left

Monday 10 August 2020, by [Squatting, T \(organizer on the Hong Kong left\)](#) (Date first published: 30 July 2020).

An interview with a Hong Kong leftist organizer on how to build power despite antagonisms with the mainstream movement and the right.

Interviewer's note: The Hong Kong anti-extradition law movement, which lasted for more than a year, has seen a revival in recent days. Originally a protest against a law that would allow for dissidents to be extradited to China, the movement has evolved into a broader struggle against the authoritarian governments of China and Hong Kong. To retaliate, the state has weaponized the logic of “national security” to put an end to the unrest. At the same time, as parts of the movement shift rightward, hostility against mainland Chinese people has become increasingly transparent, while the tendency to court right-wing politicians in the West for support has only strengthened in resolve. The voices of the Hong Kong left have effectively been drowned out. What role do Hong Kong leftists actually play in the movement?

We interviewed T, a longtime organizer on the Hong Kong left, to answer this question: Whither the Hong Kong left?

Squatting: What is the stance of the Hong Kong left regarding the anti-extradition law movement? Why hasn't it presented a united front? Is the left fractured?

T: It is probably safe to say that no one from the left supports the extradition bill, that we all want universal suffrage, and that we are united in the struggle against police brutality. Historically, however, the Hong Kong left has never spoken with one voice. Given the leaderless movement and the ever-changing situation on the ground, it is impossible to distill the left down to one single stance shared by everyone.

I also don't think there are “factions” per se among left-wing groups in Hong Kong. I wonder if people think this way because [certain articles](#) from left-leaning media outlets such as The Owl have received criticism in the past. Or perhaps they are referring to the ways different people on the left have engaged in the movement: some people have thrown themselves into the protests, whereas others have chosen to maintain cautious support, while pointing out certain shortcomings.

S: You've said that people on the Hong Kong left share many of the goals of the anti-extradition law movement. But what do they think about the movement's tactics? For example, how do they make sense of the practice of “renovating” (翻新), or vandalizing businesses with links to Chinese state capital; blockades of major highways to force a general strike (as opposed to an organized strike); and the exclusionary incidents at Kwong Wing Catering (皇庭轩) in which mainland Chinese customers or anyone speaking Mandarin were summarily rejected service during the COVID-19 outbreak? Do you think people on the left have disagreements regarding these issues?

T: I don't think leftists oppose “renovation”; on some level, these acts aim to destroy capital and structural power, which overlap with the left's objectives. Instead, there has been pushback from

some quarters in regards to attacks on individuals. Some people don't believe that we need to resolve problems in that way.

As for the issue of roadblocks and their impact on people's livelihoods, commentary has been few and far between. Police brutality has enraged people across class divides, and the routine of protesting on the weekend and going about life as usual on the weekdays has more or less helped to alleviate the pressure of protests on people's day-to-day lives. Many more people are also coming to the realization that if we continue to think of the working class as solely caring about their own livelihoods, we will fail to hear their political demands. Of course, failing to make the connection between people's livelihoods and their political demands is a bigger issue in the movement as a whole.

Concerning the disagreements about Kwong Wing, I think the issue isn't really about whether they are innocent or guilty. Instead, it is about whether to openly condemn their actions. I've seen some leftist friends writing critical posts on Facebook. But other organizations with well-known leftist leanings have conspicuously chosen not to speak out.

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This situation reflects the conundrum many leftists face with the rise of the localist movement in recent years. Do you declare your principles and beliefs at the risk of alienating the masses, or do you stay silent in hopes of garnering more widespread support? Those who select the former are able to maintain a staunch, left-wing perspective on Hong Kong's democracy movement, and perhaps even open up a new discourse. Those who go with the latter believe that they must enter the political fray and assimilate into the broader mainstream, so that they can walk alongside the recently politicized masses and work from within to shift people's perspectives toward the left. Neither of them are wrong.

S: To what extent do these different stances come from already existing divides? Was there ever a more unified course of action or working consensus?

T: The variation in our positions is not major, though there is a difference between people who commit themselves fully to the movement, and those who support it from a critical distance. I think these differences become clearer when they discuss the Kwong Wing incidents and the mainstream "[international front](#)" that has relied on [lobbying](#) the Western ruling class for support.

Leftists have never formed a so-called consensus on different issues. There are longstanding disagreements, such as those surrounding the [universal retirement fund](#). Different people and organizations hold varying views on how to organize and how to address issues from localism to Hong Kong independence. We respect the range of approaches and the vantage points that justify them. Do these differences map onto the divide between those who tend to give the movement their unquestioning support, and those who hold it at arm's length? I don't know. But I have witnessed an obvious turn: tolerance of differing opinions has deteriorated dramatically.

Take the Kwong Wing incidents, for example. Just because people expressed their concerns about their policies during the COVID-19 outbreak, doesn't mean they don't support the movement. However, critics were largely written off as detractors to the movement and verbally abused for being at odds with the mainstream. This damages our efforts at solidarity. As I understand it, there have been some [small-scale attempts](#) to resolve the conflict through discussion, but they often fall short of resolving major political differences. In the past decade, people have also gradually moved their disagreements online. Are these disputes a productive form of communication? That's still up

for debate.

S: What has the left contributed to the movement? Are there divisions between the frontline and the rearguard?

T: The decentralized turn of the movement has also meant that we largely participate as individuals. Even when a person is involved with a left-wing group, they wouldn't be assigned a specific role at the protest site. In fact, except for the special role played by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) in the "three strikes" (business, school, market) and the [union battlefront](#), your role specifically as a leftist doesn't actually come up all that much when you go to street rallies, table at events, clash with the police, or hold community screenings.

Of course, what you talk about in these situations might depart from the mainstream dialogue. There were also particular contexts that did have strong undercurrents of leftist participation and tried to amplify marginalized voices: the "[Housewives against the Extradition Bill](#)" and "[Stand with Yuli](#)" actions come to mind. There had also been people who intentionally talked to tourists from mainland China and [distributed information](#) in Simplified Chinese via AirDrop. Ultimately, I think our internal divergence may just be in our attitudes and reactions toward certain things in the movement that obviously contradict leftist principles.

S: Some left-wing organizations in Taiwan, mainly the pro-unification parties (親中), are [very critical](#) of the Hong Kong movement. What do you think?

T: As far as I know, some leftists in Taiwan have been influenced by Third-Worldism and tend to romanticize Beijing. In Hong Kong, for sure, some leftists are concerned about the oppression of the third world and critique the violence of US imperialism. That being said, they don't think positively of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) either. Most left-wing groups in Hong Kong share the same attitude toward the CCP as liberals' or, for that matter, that of the majority of pro-democracy Hong Kong citizens. The suppression of the labor movement in mainland China gives them all the more reason to disavow the CCP.

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Evidently, the mainstream Hong Kong left differs sharply from these quarters of the Taiwanese left, especially in terms of China's role in global politics today. The Hong Kong left wouldn't really have concerns about reaching an anti-CCP consensus. Of course, being anti-CCP for the sake of being anti-China and perpetuating Sinophobia to stoke the flames of the [new Cold War](#) are another matter entirely.

S: In the past decade, how did the Hong Kong left participate in an increasingly politicized and polarized civil society? Have there been any enemies to the left? Any major shifts in the political landscape?

T: I'd say the two most significant groups have been the [League of Social Democrats](#) (LSD) and [Left 21](#). The LSD is a political party with distinct trajectories and legacies in street protests. There's also the Labor Party that was established in recent years. These two parties collaborate a lot, but the image of the Labor Party is less radical. In addition, the [Neighborhood and Worker's Service Centre](#) and the [Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood](#) (ADPL) stand firmly with the grassroots and the working class. Yet, they have an even less radical image than the Labor Party.

At its inception, the LSD branded itself as an epitome of real leftism, but they have rarely made a big deal out of it since then. Left 21 is the one with a more distinct leftist image and have been more

explicit about being left-wing. It actively participated in street protests and propagated leftist political thought for years. In recent years, however, it has gone quiet and hasn't been seen in public for a while.

For a time, following the [anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement](#), the left was at the height of its power and had harnessed the momentum of social movement. There were, for example, "[Occupy Central](#)" in 2011-2012 (not to be confused with the one initiated by Benny Tai in 2014) and the 2013 [dockworkers' strike](#). For a while, the left was formidable, but it soon became unfit to lead the movement—crushed by their fear of the CCP, vulnerable against the rise of localism, and cowed into silence by the now ubiquitous label of "leftard" or "left plastic" (左膠), a pejorative frequently attributed to those whose naive idealism gets in the way of pragmatic politics and mainstream discourse in capitalist society (somewhat akin to Western conservative narratives about "snowflakes" and liberal elites), largely imposed by the right.

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Leftist organizations themselves also don't have clout to spare. They tend to maintain collaborative relationships with liberal and centrist pro-democracy parties. As a result, when the centrists were criticized for not taking up leadership in the 2014 movement, for example, the left came under fire as well.

It's true that the left is not as impactful as it was before, but there are still people organizing in its diminished space. The 2017 Hoi Lai Estate [sanitation workers' strike](#) is a good example. Still, it's been very difficult to recruit new blood who are also self-proclaimed leftists.

As for enemies, there are just too many, from the regime to the capitalist structure itself, not to mention the localists who have boosted "leftard" rhetoric in order to brand themselves as the more "practical" alternative. These forces have been truly destructive to the Hong Kong left.

S: Have the enemies of the left changed during the movement? Is "leftard" still a relevant label? Has the left been empowered or weakened?

T: It's hard to say if there has been a huge change, but our enemies have certainly become more powerful than ever. I know that I said that political leaders would technically have more to work with when more citizens are politicized, but really, how many people can one organizer mobilize and influence? It's not easy to win people over, especially when the majority is influenced by online public opinion and when the left's voice is all but stifled. Even if the "leftard" narrative is no longer the go-to strawman, it doesn't necessarily bode well for leftists either. Nowadays, the right doesn't at all need the left to be a scapegoat to make themselves heard.

As for whether the left has been empowered or weakened, I really can't say. The public certainly seem to be leaning right, and that definitely makes the left look weakened. However, some left-wing activists did [win district council elections](#), not to mention there has been a relative groundswell of support for strikes as a political weapon, with many workers promptly unionizing since December 2019. In that sense, the left does seem empowered.

I would need to see what happens next to know for sure. For instance, will there be space for leftists after the [pro-democracy primaries](#) and after the [2020 Legislative Council election](#)? Will they be able to claim any seats at the table?

S: What are some major problems faced by the Hong Kong left going forward? What

obstacles are there in practice? How else can we contribute to the frontlines and rearguard of leftist mobilization?

T: As contradictory as this might sound, even though most leftists agree with the ultimate goals of the movement, as long as the movement continues to be “in motion”, leftists have no choice but to go with the flow. I’m not saying we need to hit pause on the uprising, but going with the flow makes it hard to make any critique of its future trajectory and practical operations more concrete.

But going with the flow isn’t necessarily a bad thing either, because it keeps us connected to the mainstream public. Does it help expand the left’s influence? Does it compel more people to care about issues important to the left? After a year, things are honestly not looking good. What leftists are truly concerned about still have not garnered enough attention. With the exception of [unionization](#) and [unemployment insurance](#), overarching left visions, such as the redistribution of wealth, are miles away from the foreground of the movement.

“Whether we organize in the rearguard or agitate on the frontlines, we all face the same problem: the center-right has made up the bulk of the current movement.”

In the upcoming election, the performance of some left-leaning politicians might also be unpredictable. Whether we organize in the rearguard or agitate on the frontlines, we all face the same problem: the center-right has made up the bulk of the current movement. For the rearguard, the battlefield is where public opinion is exchanged and shaped, for which a grasp of digital culture is essential. It is a challenge to platform participants who aren’t resistant to progressive ideas.

For organizers who want to pull the newly politicized toward the left, or at least as far away from the right as possible, they also need some new tactics. Usually, in-person conversations make people more honest and amenable to engaging in good faith. At the same time, the most inflammatory and thus most visible moments of political intervention tend to be conflict; like it or not, organizers need to come to terms with how discourse gains traction and attracts eyeballs, take it as an opportunity to augment the left’s tactics and principles, and work the clashes into our advantage.

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