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Hong Kong

After the fire: Soil in spring

- Features -

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The ongoing crackdown on dissent means that we can no longer seek recourse from pro-democracy District or Legislative councillors, as they have all been imprisoned, disqualified from office or have stepped down in recognition of the futility of continuing the "[parliamentary front](#)" of Hong Kong's struggle.

Beyond parliamentarism

The collapse of the parliamentary front has delegitimised the idea that the legislature is the appropriate and primary venue for political struggle in a city where political advocacy and activism were once thought to be the exclusive realm of career politicians. The experiences of Hong Kong's democracy movement with labour activism during 2019 poses the question of whether a unions-based approach to continuing the political struggle is feasible under the National Security Law.

The government's harsh and thoroughgoing repression of dissent has quelled Hong Kong into quiescence. Two women [were arrested](#) and charged with sedition for social media posts questioning the government's pandemic policy. A man [was arrested](#) and charged with sedition after a pedestrian passing by the man's flat called the police after spotting a flag with a banned protest slogan hanging from a drying rack. Six members of the public attending the hearing of Chow Hang-tung who applauded a speech she gave supporting the victims of the Tiananmen Square Massacre were [arrested](#) and charged with sedition. [1]. A petition by university students condemning Putin's war in Ukraine and calling for internationalist solidarity with the Ukrainian people was the subject of [a hit piece](#) published by the pro-Beijing Wen Wei Po newspaper, whose editorials excoriating pro-democracy activists and groups have often foreshadowed official acts of state repression. These are all minor and everyday instances of repression; the government's litany of high-profile attacks on leading dissidents and organisations, such as Stand News, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, and the [Hong Kong 47](#), should go without mention.

Under the National Security Law, unions cannot afford to explicitly support the struggle for democracy and self-determination lest they attract the retribution of the authorities. By design, the red line between what is permissible and what is not is left uncertain, imposing a chilling effect on the expression of dissent. You certainly cannot call for the overthrow of the government or independence or self-determination for Hong Kong, but can you criticise government labour or economic policy, or Hong Kong's crony-capitalist economic system? Will there be unions where the rank-and-file and the leadership both possess the courage and the will to test this red line, potentially risking the future of their unions and their own personal freedom?

We can hope that our fellow Hongkongers will have such courage, but we cannot demand heroism from every participant in our struggle, especially now when the regime is still eagerly attempting to stamp out every dissenting voice in civil society.

Simultaneously, as shown by the demise of the PTU and the HKCTU, Hongkongers can no longer expect to rely on NGOs as service providers, or on the self-exploitation and sacrifice of individual activists. We must instead seek to empower ourselves by participating in the struggle by acting with agency in organising ourselves to act collectively and independently, not by passively awaiting orders or directions or for others to do it for us.

Labour organising is democracy in practice

Even as unions, including those new unions formed during the unionisation wave of 2019, are forced to retreat from "politics" to engage only in "livelihood" issues, they remain inherently politicised bodies involved in political work. The unequal power dynamic between the employer and employee stems from political and economic factors. In Hong Kong, these include the inadequate labour laws that fail to protect workers' rights, the absence of collective bargaining rights for unionised workers, and the general lack of legal protection for workers wishing to take industrial action against their employers. The Hong Kong government has made clear that it will not waver from its stewardship of Hong Kong's neoliberal crony-capitalist system, and as long as that system remains in place, labour disputes will continue to arise as a symptom of the dysfunction inherent to capitalism.

The importance of labour organising now is to incubate political consciousness and the capacity of Hongkongers for collective direct action wherever and whenever labour disputes arise. After the demise of the HKCTU, only workers who organise themselves will be capable of rebuilding Hong Kong's labour movement as an independent political force. Small-scale industrial actions like the successful [Foodpanda strike](#) in November 2021 are opportunities for Hongkongers to practise how to organise with like-minded people, to mobilise them for a campaign towards a short-term common goal, to communicate and partake in collective decision-making to ensure coordination and cooperation, and to muster up the courage to struggle for bolder gains. Most importantly, these are opportunities for everyone to become an organiser, a convenor, and a leader. The HKCTU or District Councillors are no longer able to intervene on our behalf. We must learn to take the initiative and fight for control over our own lives ourselves.

This statement by a striking Foodpanda courier from this [Stand News article](#) is particularly revealing: "Everyone understands that 2019 was an important turning point. I had never experienced anything like it in the past I was a normal, unassuming kid who grew up in a greenhouse and had never even been in a fight. In the past, I might have resignedly acquiesced to pay cuts, but since 2019, we've all learnt about a new way to resist injustice that is, to go on strike." [\[2\]](#)

The same courier also observed that the police, although present at the strike, did not intervene, likely because the strike did not seem overtly politically motivated. This means that organised workers who go on strike against workplace injustices will be forced into the unfavourable position of having to present their grievances as primarily livelihood concerns to avoid the attention of the authorities, even if their exploitation is blatantly rooted in political reasons. In the near future, it is unlikely that there could be a repeat of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance strike that brings political demands to bear against the government without the organisers being charged with sedition.

In spite of this, labour organising the prerequisite for unlocking the most powerful weapon available to a popular struggle, the general strike remains an important process by which workers learn how to wage their own struggles themselves. As the examples of the HAEA and Foodpanda strikes have demonstrated, it is only when workers unionised or not make their own decisions about how their struggle is fought that they commit to take risks and make sacrifices in waging these struggles. The immediate importance of direct and participatory democracy to the success of a labour struggle gives rise to the hope that organised labour in Hong Kong can act as incubators of democracy prototypes in miniature of what our society could look like after freedom and self-determination is won.

The "military school" of struggle

When workers band together to resist economic exploitation, these fights, no matter how small or fleeting, are the process by which they realise the power they possess in their collective strength. Friedrich Engels called these

intermittent conflicts between labour and capital more often than not taking the form of a strike "the military school of the working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided... and as schools of war the unions are unexcelled."

For Hongkongers, the uprising of 2019 has clarified our own "great struggle" as one which fights for democracy, self-determination, and justice. That uprising made Hongkongers aware of their capability to organise themselves to resist oppression and injustice, which can now only be exercised in superficially-"depoliticised" labour disputes.

Even in this nadir of the struggle, the fact remains that the process of getting organised to resist injustice can only be an inherently political act. How can it not be, when the government, recognising the organisational and mobilisational impetus that civil society groups lent to the 2019 uprising, had immediately sought [to crush these groups](#) using the National Security Law? To struggle against injustice by participating in a union or other forms of grassroots organisation especially one which values and practises democracy is not only to resist an exploitative boss, but the entire authoritarian political structure dominated by the neoliberal government and its capitalist allies, backed up by a [repressive colonial security apparatus](#).

Hongkongers who organise on the basis of their identity as workers to fight against injustice should see the objective of their struggle not only as the achievement of better pay, working conditions, and fair treatment for workers, but also the empowerment of workers to wage these struggles themselves. We need to internalise the idea that we can rely neither on foreign sanctions or interventions, nor local activists or politicians who we expect to make it their life's work to wage Hong Kong's struggle on our behalf, but that the liberation of Hong Kong will be the task of all of us together.

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For now, Hongkongers should organise to tackle injustice in the economic sphere. Through these exercises in self-empowerment, Hongkongers can accrue experience and confidence in democratic and participatory self-organisation the paucity of which had prevented the uprising of 2019 from developing further, leading to its defeat by the government's counteroffensive. These skills, honed in the "military school" of labour struggle, will be indispensable to the victory or defeat of any future uprising attempted by Hongkongers.

This does not mean there is an arbitrary dichotomy between "politics" and "livelihood" issues. It is the opposite that is true economic and political struggles against oppression are intertwined and inseparable. It is owing to the tactical need to avoid bringing down the repression of the government security apparatus that workers are forced to present their grievances as primarily "livelihood" issues.

This subdued approach is not motivated by the deceitful collaborationism of the pro-Beijing and pro-business Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, but by pragmatic concerns about the sustainability of a reinvigorated labour movement and the safety of its participants that must operate under the white terror of the NSL. All this means is that the political component of Hong Kong's struggle must go underground and operate clandestinely for example, small circles of anonymous activists producing agitprop, hosting closed-door discussion salons or even [partaking in direct action](#) while the task of empowering Hongkongers in the sphere of economic struggle continues aboveground, subdued but never depoliticised.

This is an inconclusive and unsatisfactory response to the question of how Hong Kong's political struggle can be taken forward in the era of the National Security Law. But this analysis is only applicable to the present moment. The government has used the COVID-19 pandemic to justify its harshest repressive measures, most notably to severely

restrict public gatherings. An initiative which hosted screenings of contemporary Hong Kong films including two documentaries about the 2019 uprising, "Inside the Red Brick Wall" and "Taking Back the Legislature" was shut down when police raided a screening on the grounds that it [violated COVID-19 social gathering restrictions](#). Solo protests [in solidarity with Ukraine are](#) quickly cordoned off from public view by swarms of police on the grounds that they risk drawing a crowd of spectators. We can only hope that, once the worst of the pandemic recedes or once the Hong Kong government chooses to acknowledge the growing public demand to ["live with the virus"](#) and relaxes pandemic control policy new possibilities and opportunities for resistance can emerge.

ĤkÒá %"9È The weeds that survive the wildfire will sprout anew from spring winds

The National Security Law has definitively crushed the uprising of 2019. Still, the roots from which the uprising had sprung, remain: a belief in liberal-democratic values and a burning desire to fight in their defence.

In the age of NSL, Hongkongers must be weeds. The crop which used to stand tall in the fields has been burnt away, but the weeds underneath remain. By continuing to organise, the roots of democracy and resistance can be nurtured and strengthened. Connections between people are what make a movement. Not only should we entrench these roots, we should also seek to proliferate them in the soil reaching out to more people and bringing them into the fold, discussing, learning and organising with them, just as we allow ourselves to be influenced by their experiences, ideas, and actions in turn.

Nobody can predict when the next major crisis will happen, or what it may look like. What Hongkongers must do in the meantime is to learn from our experiences during the uprising of 2019 and rebuild our movement from its foundations. Hongkongers have come into history not as passive subjects, as we had been during the Handover but as actors possessing the agency to determine our own destiny. When the spring wind comes blowing, we must be ready.

Read Part 1 "[After the fire: Fallen flowers](#)"

Read Part 2 "[After the fire: Against "burnism"](#)"

Source: [Lausan](#)

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[1] One of whom was Leo Tang.

[2] Stand News shut down on 29 December 2021 after it was raided by National Security police and its editors were arrested. Articles published by Stand News and Apple Daily have been archived in full on [collection.news](#).