

# **Hong Kong – new masters for old**

Anarchist Communist Federation

1995

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WHEN HONG KONG reverts into the hands of the Chinese government in 1997, this will not so much be a blow for British colonial interests but a victory for that new superpower — the international capitalist class.

The territory has its colonial origins in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in the Opium Wars. British traders made vast profits by selling opium to the Chinese people, making drug addicts of thousands of them. The Chinese government demanded more control over the trade, and in 1841 the British army seized the trading posts of Hong Kong Island and the surrounding territories. Settlement of the conflict resulted in an agreement to return the land in 1997. Then, one section of the ruling class will honour its pledge to another.

The British have turned the territory into a colonial and capitalist haven, and today it serves Western needs in the profitable Far Eastern markets. Imperial China, in the meantime, was overturned by Maoist politics and economics. But modern China has changed again. Its rulers have come to realise how capitalist concessions can benefit its dominant class. It has established Special Economic Zones where state-managed capitalism flourishes. These zones are closed areas to which selected and vetted business people and workers are invited to profit from the experiment, but from which the ordinary, discontented and unemployed Chinese are excluded.

## **Business**

Hong Kong, in 1997, will become one of these zones, except that the experiment will be opened up to involve the international business community, both those Western and Far Eastern businesses already making profits there, and nouveau riche Chinese investors. Thus, its government will change, but not its dominant elite. Indeed, the British government, through negotiations concerning the handover, have been careful to ensure the continuing prosperity of their business friends, and it is in Chinese interests to accommodate them.

The actual losers will be the working class of Hong Kong. The appalling Chinese record on 'human rights' is well known to the Hong Kong Chinese. The 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of dissident students in Beijing resulted in huge demonstrations in Hong Kong. In part these were pro-democracy and anti the Chinese government, but in part they were also a result of fear and anger at the way the British were happy to sell out the Hong Kong population to this regime. Thus there is fear amongst those who have opposed China that they will be singled out for persecution after 1997. But the Chinese government does not torture and murder only its high profile political opponents. Hong Kong Chinese who have visited relatives in China have witnessed executions in Chinese market places of 'criminals' guilty of relatively minor crimes and public order offences. Such things are hidden from Western officials and tourists of course, but send a clear message to the working class of the colony as to how those who threaten the new regime will be treated.

## **Terrified**

Although the Hong Kong Chinese are terrified of what 1997 will bring, they are not content with their current situation. Of the 6,000,000 residents of the colony many thousands live below the poverty line. The cost of living is extremely high. The rent on a tiny flat in the island's bleak estates of tower blocks is commonly as much as HK\$10,000 (£1000) a month. Consequently, three

generations, including married couples and their children, commonly live together, many people to a room, sleeping and eating in shifts for lack of space. Many other old people, most of whom don't qualify for any decent standard of welfare or social care, become what are known as 'cage men'. They live in a hostel, sharing a room with several other people, each of them in a cage, containing their bed, into which they lock themselves for fear of attack by other residents (which, given the stress, is common). Many others are entirely homeless.

There will be no way out of this sort of situation as 1997 approaches. After Tiananmen Square, the British promised to issue 250,000 family passports to allay fears about the hand over. Of course, without there needing to be any official policy on the matter, only those able to afford to make the trip, the wealthier middle class, would be able to leave (the flight alone costs around £700 per person). In December 1995 it was reported that the figure is likely to be nearer 145,000 passports. Working class people will be left stranded, and dissenters and criminals face the Chinese judicial machine. Indeed, those already in Hong Kong jails face the very realistic possibility that they will be executed in 1997 rather than be allowed to burden the Chinese state.

## **Middle class**

The Hong Kong Chinese make up about 98% of the colony's population. Of the remainder, only a handful are ex-patriots wealthy enough to inhabit huge residences in the Islands mountains (one of them being the usual absent governor Chris Patten). The rest are mostly non-Chinese immigrants who suffer the worst economic and social conditions of all. Many of these are Filipino who have migrated there through economic desperation and take badly paid jobs without either security or employment rights. Hong Kong is dotted with building sites, as property developers hurry to make the most of the exiting opportunities offered by 1997 and throw up sky-scraper after sky-scraper. Cheap immigrant labour is hired to work the sites. The workers climb rickety, cheap bamboo scaffolding which extends for several stories and typically defies even the lowest of safety standards. As harnesses would slow the work down, deaths from falls are common. Young Filipino women come too, and work as low paid nannies to Hong Kong Chinese middle class families. Typically they sleep in rooms big enough only for a small mattress and are forced to accept abuse from their employers. As if this were not bad enough, these immigrants will have no place in 1997. The Chinese government have made it clear that the non-Chinese working class will have no legal status and will be forcibly repatriated.

Another minority group facing persecution are the Vietnamese 'boat-people' who fill detention camps in the Hong Kong territory. Many have been there for years in atrocious conditions, but prefer this to the political persecution they face at home. Riots broke out in the camps in 1994/5 as the British began to fulfil their promise to the Chinese government to deport the Vietnamese all before 1997. They are made unwelcome in Hong Kong, but have nowhere else they can safely go. Their plight was highlighted in 1995 by a break out from one of the camps in which men escaped to a near-by town, got hold of basic hygiene equipment like toothbrushes and toothpaste, and then actually re-entered the camp in order to give them to their families.

## **'Freedom'**

The British government are using the working class of Hong Kong to suit their own domestic needs. In 1995 Chris Patten announced plans to issue 3,000,000 passports to the Hong Kong Chinese, that is, to 50% of the population. In Hong Kong it was quickly realised that the promise was insincere, and what a cynical game this was. The 'plans' could be used to create an immigration storm in Britain to deflect attention from governmental and social crisis here, for these potential immigrants could be portrayed as threatening jobs. It would also strengthen the government hand against opponents to 1997, because it would be appearing to threaten the Chinese into making concessions. Not least, it would appear in Hong Kong that the governor was attempting to do his best for those for whose welfare he was responsible. The 'plans' were soon dropped, however, as the Hong Kong Chinese saw that it was British governmental interests and not their own which were being upheld. Those who will get passports will therefore be Far-Eastern business people who will maintain their interests in Hong Kong after 1997 but who can live in the 'freedom' of Britain. Their shared ethnicity with the Hong Kong Chinese working class is an irrelevance, as is any notion that the colony is reverting to its 'rightful owners'. In 1997 the working class of Hong Kong will exchange one set of masters for another.

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