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Hong Kong

# After the fire: Fallen flowers

- Features -

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**In 2019, I was still a secondary school student. Having missed the Umbrella Movement of 2014, I was anxious to contribute to the struggle I saw unfolding on television and on the streets. On the night of 21 July, when triad members attacked protestors and commuters returning to the satellite town of Yuen Long, I was in Sheung Wan, where militant frontliners would deface the national emblem on the headquarters of the Liaison Office. When the police began to push down Connaught Road, most of the woleifei backliners, like myself, retreated back towards Central and Admiralty, ushered by a group of frontliners who announced that we would only be a liability once the fighting started. At that moment, I realised that I did not want to be a liability, but that I wanted to contribute to the movement to the best of my ability.**

There must be tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Hongkongers who feel the same desire and attendant frustrations—the impulse to “do their part” for the struggle but being unable to because of their isolation from other like-minded Hongkongers, or because of they lack awareness of how they could participate in such a struggle on their own initiative.

Three years on from 2019, honouring the sacrifice of those who have been brutalised, arrested, or forced into exile requires us to critically assess not only their victories during the uprising, but also where their imagining of how the struggle could develop—how the struggle must develop, in order to survive—had fallen short. Only then can we prime the soil for future generations of Hongkongers who will inherit our struggle.

The National Security Law has ripped, wildfire-like, through the political landscape of Hong Kong's independent civil society and labour movement, and has made obsolete the methodology of struggle that had evolved within it. But as the executive committee of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions remarked on the eve of their disbandment: “the flowers fallen are not the flowers heartless; as they become soil in spring, they nourish more flowers.” [\[1\]](#)

The doctrine of “Burnism” was one which arose in the context of the uprising in 2019. [\[2\]](#) In 2022, what does this threat—of whipping up a fiery conflagration to consume all Hong Kong—really entail? In a landscape scorched barren by repression, the question lying before us is: sifting through the ashes, what lessons can we learn? How can we rebuild and carry on the struggle? [\[3\]](#)

## **Unionisation as tactic: The “three strikes” and the electoral front**

In 2019, militant frontliners were not only concerned with resisting police brutality, but they had also recognised the importance of disrupting the logistical and economic processes integral to the daily functioning of the city as a means of applying further pressure on the government.

The call for a “three strikes” action reflects the co-optation of the concept of a general strike by the Hong Kong democracy movement as a means to achieve political ends. Although the action on 5 August 2019 only lasted for a day, it introduced the tactic of a general strike into the collective consciousness of Hongkongers. Subsequently, people began to organise new unions in their workplaces with the aim of mobilising further general strikes against the government.

As the unionisation drive continued, another goal was brought to the fore: the capture of the Labour functional constituency vote in the Chief Executive elections. [4] Trade unions which have been officially registered with the government are eligible to cast a vote for the three representatives belonging to the Labour functional constituency in Hong Kong's 90-member Legislative Council. 60 representatives elected from the Labour functional constituency also sit on the 1,500-member Election Committee which selects the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. [5]

Although these representatives are not directly elected by individual union members themselves but by the union as a corporate body, the mass registration of new trade unions composed of members sympathetic to the democracy movement was seen as a potential way to “game” the otherwise undemocratic and inaccessible Chief Executive elections.

Both approaches to effecting political change that were once the aims of the “union front” of the 2019 uprising—gaining sufficient mobilising power to initiate a general strike and to secure a foothold in the Chief Executive Election Committee—have now been shut down by the National Security Law and the 2021 “electoral reforms” imposed by Beijing.

However, the takeaway from the failure of these two union-based approaches to political struggle is not that union organising has become irrelevant. [6] Rather, the lesson is that getting organised should not merely be viewed as an expedient means to achieve political goals, but as an end in itself—the end goal being the empowerment of individuals. This can be achieved through organisations, unions or otherwise, that allow rank-and-file members to determine their own course of action and exercise their collective power through a decision-making process that is participatory and democratic. This is borne out by the success of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance strike in 2020.

## Democratic rank-and-file decisionmaking: The Hospital Employees' Strike

A union is only able to stand up to an exploitative authority by uniting the strength of its members to make a credible threat: fair treatment or we go on strike. This threat is only credible if a union's rank and file are willing to follow through with it, risking their livelihoods in the process. An order from union leadership for workers to stake their livelihoods on a struggle in which they have no stake or say will most likely be ignored. Conversely, the support for a strike would be many times stronger if the workers had resolved to commit to such a course of action themselves.

Without an inclusive and democratic decision-making process to involve rank-and-file members in the course and development of their organisation's struggle, it is no surprise that any demands for sacrifices on their part will be perceived as unreasonable and unconvincing.

The HKCTU's call for a general strike in protest of the Extradition Law Amendment Bill in mid-June of 2019—the beginning of the uprising—went unheeded by most workers in Hong Kong. [7] Half a year later, 7,000 medics of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance would go on strike for five days to demand that the government close the border with mainland China in light of the nascent COVID-19 pandemic.

Their decision to go on strike came after an open and inclusive deliberative process and a union-wide referendum, in which an overwhelming majority supported going on strike. The union would later vote to reject an extension of the strike, amidst a worsening pandemic situation, after some of their demands were met by the government.

Instead of being a vague call for a general strike that had been directed to the entirety of Hong Kong's working class—thus appealing to nobody in particular—the HAEA action was given shape and purpose from the confluence of factors at the time. [8] This was a response to the immediate issue of the pandemic from workers in a specific and relevant occupational sector who were working for the same employer: medics employed by the public Hospital Authority.

The HAEA strike was also focused on a clear objective—the closure of Hong Kong's border crossings with mainland China. The clarity of the rationale and objective of the strike action united the HAEA members and motivated them to participate proactively in their self-organisation. More than a tenth of the Authority's employees would end up going on strike, in what would be the most powerful industrial action of the past decade. The significant support and participation from Hospital Authority staff for the HAEA action, and the HAEA's successful establishment of a strike fund, meant that the government's subsequent settling of scores was limited to docking the pay of workers for the number of days for which they had gone on strike. [9]

## Organisational resilience requires participatory democracy

The demise of the Professional Teachers' Union and the Confederation of Trade Unions highlights the importance of an organisation's participatory democracy to its resilience in the face of repression. [10]

Over their decades of existence, these organisations had become bureaucratised and functioned more like NGOs that prioritised the provision of services and political advocacy within the existing political and legal framework at the cost of rank-and-file participation and empowerment. As noted [11] by former HKCTU organiser and vice-chairperson Leo Tang—jailed for four months after being arrested during the 2019 uprising, and detained again on 31 March 2022—this had been a problem common to civil society organisations in Hong Kong, from which the HKCTU and PTU had failed to distinguish themselves as explicitly workers' organisations. [12]

Despite the presence of many dedicated activists, some of whom continue to organise workers to fight for their rights wherever such struggles arise, these organisations lacked a strong or active rank-and-file that was involved in deciding the direction or role of the organisation in relation to Hong Kong's struggle for democracy.

By 2021, the regime's counterattack was in full swing. The HKCTU and PTU and their leaders were viciously hounded by pro-Beijing media, who called for their persecution by the authorities. Once the decision to disband had been made by the leadership, there was no significant opposition from the rank-and-file membership, who neither had the motivation nor the capability to assume the responsibility of defending an organisation over which they had always had little control or ownership.

In the case of the PTU, this was not helped by the speed with which its leadership rushed to make a decision on whether to disband. The PTU's leadership had overridden the requirement in their own constitution to forgo the requirement of a two-thirds majority of the entire membership (95,000 members) in favour of disbandment before it could proceed. Instead, a small group of 140 representatives were invited to vote on the issue.

We cannot demand that the leaders of these organisations fight on despite genuine concern for their personal freedom and safety and those of their members. To resist heroically at the cost of their personal freedom, as activists like Chow Hang-tung and many others have chosen to do, is a decision one must make for themselves.

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However, the fact that the survival of organisations dedicated to fighting for democracy and workers' rights can hinge solely on the courage of individual leaders is an indictment of their insufficiently-democratic and bureaucratic structures. This has proven to be a fatal flaw in the face of determined repression by the regime.

This vulnerability, on a strategic level, of civil society organisations—including unions—to intimidation and personal attacks by the regime reflects a deep political contradiction. It may be more convenient and less demanding for ordinary laypeople to cede agency to leaders than to learn to surmount the challenges of self-organisation and democratic procedure themselves. However, taking responsibility as a member of a community to achieve its self-determination, through regular and direct participation in collective decision-making processes, is what is required for democracy to exist.

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

Read Part 3 "[After the fire: Soil in spring](#)"

Source: [Lausan](#)

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