

# Politics, Pandemics and Protest: A Case of 2020 Health Workers Strike in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

This photo essay presents a strike that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Hong Kong. While the literature shows that industrial actions in the healthcare sector are not uncommon, they are rarely discussed through a visual approach. Indeed, healthcare workers are very difficult to organise and mobilise due to the challenges in justifying the action and the potential conflicts to their professionalism. This photo essay offers a descriptive and visual account of the strike, explaining the workers' motivation, demands, the negotiation process, and the result of the strike. It provides much insight into understanding healthcare workers' struggles during the pandemic and facilitates more discussions on the politics of industrial actions.

## Keywords

Hong Kong, pandemic, health workers, strikes Hong Kong

This photo essay is one of the outputs of a research project investigating a wave of new union activism in Hong Kong in 2019-20, focusing particularly on a strike organised by one such new union formed by hospital employees. This event compressed into a short period (4<sup>th</sup> December 2019 to 7<sup>th</sup> February 2020) in a dense urban space – a nexus between a strong political clash essentially between democracy and authoritarianism and the emergence of a global medical pandemic as experienced by those knowledgeable about and directly impacted by these twin crises. Hospitals are on the front line of pandemics, and Hong Kong experienced a foretaste of Covid-19 in 2003<sup>1</sup>. The violence on campuses and streets since the summer of 2019 was also reflected in the A&E wards and the daily experience of workers.

Industrial actions and labour activism occur across a range of sectors, in Hong Kong, from construction and dock workers through to police and teachers, but never in healthcare (HK Labour Rights Monitor, 2022) Elsewhere, industrial actions in the healthcare sector are not uncommon (Essex and Weldon, 2022), healthcare workers are exceptionally difficult to organise and mobilise due to the ethical concerns associated with impacting care for the sick. (Li and Ng, 2021; Chan et al., 2023).

In this photo essay, we present a descriptive account of the hospital workers' industrial actions in 2020 and aim to draw more academic attention towards labour activism in the healthcare sector. As observers, we asked (1) what motivates hospital staff in Hong Kong to participate in the strike? And (2) how did it happen? Photographic images are a particularly rich source of information; they are 'holistic, direct, personal and emotional' (Grady, 1991: 30), and can offer

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<sup>1</sup> In 2003 Hong Kong experienced a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic.

some unique contribution to the understanding of labour activism (Liu and Chan, 2024). The first and second authors are responsible for the academic content as part of a government-funded project to understand the political crisis, and all photos presented in this essay were taken by the third author, who is an award-winning photojournalist in Hong Kong.

It is important not to see this narrative as winning and losing or even right and wrong but as an examination of a moment in time. This is not just because there is what amounts to a legally enforced interpretation of correct thought now in Hong Kong on aspects of our history, but because the reader may view these pictures through the eyes of a doctor working in a Gaza hospital in Palestine or an exclusive private clinic on the Upper East Side of New York.

### Background of the strike

Dating back to the colonial period, unions in Hong Kong have been constrained by the complication of union politics in the city (see, e.g., Chan et al., 2019). In addition, labour policies in Hong Kong have significantly undermined workers' power by denying their rights of collective bargaining (ITUC, n.d.). However, the growth of new unions during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement in 2019, with possibly 4000 groups applying to register (Human Rights Watch, 2021), demonstrated a much higher level of militancy and willingness to participate in mobilisation and protest (Chan, 2020).

The Hong Kong Hospital Staff Strike took place in the context of the looming COVID-19 epidemic. Wuhan, the city in China that was first observed for the COVID-19 outbreak, recorded thousands of infections in December 2019. A Wuhan visitor was preliminarily tested positive for COVID-19 on January 23, 2020. The development has flustered many; immediately on that day, five medical unions, along with nineteen other unions and organisations, released a statement demanding border control. The next day, one of the five medical unions, the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (hereafter HAEA), revealed in a press conference that they were planning a general strike to force the government to suspend tourists from mainland China entering Hong Kong (Taylor and Chan, 2020). At the same time, emails were sent to its members calling them for an Emergency General Meeting for the motion.



Figure 1. The HAEA rallies their members at the Hospital Authority Building

## About the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance

The HAEA was established on the December, 2019 initially as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement in Hong Kong (BBC, 2019). The executives were employees of the Hospital Authority (HA), a public organisation managing all public hospitals in Hong Kong. Membership grew slowly, organised through social media, such as Telegram, posters and mass meetings (Figure 1), a union Executive Committee was formed and the number of members proliferated after the union announced a strike call, with membership reaching 8000 on January 27, 2020, and around 20,000 members the day before the strike (approximately 25% of total Hong Kong Hospital Authority employment).



*Figure 2 An executive member of the HAEA, a white ribbon as a symbol to support the strike*

## The Alliance's Demand

The first and primary demand made by the HAEA was the request for border control that no tourists should enter the Hong Kong border from mainland China. Later, the HAEA further evolved their demands into five: In addition to the border control, they urged for a government appeal for the public to put on facemasks, a sufficient supply of isolation wards and suspension of the non-emergency services, a follow-up on escaping patients and assurance of workplace safety, as well as sufficient support to medical practitioners in charge of quarantine patients. Whilst these five demands echoed the political movement slogans, the focus was on the human crisis of the pandemic. Likewise, the ribbon of support was white, not yellow (Figure 2) to distinguish this from the 2014 Yellow Umbrella movement<sup>2</sup>, which carried over to the 2019 protests.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2014 Yellow Umbrella movement was a pro-democracy movement named after the ubiquitous umbrellas used to protect protesters from the police.



*Figure 3 Members of the HAHE holding demonstration posters: “on strike” (red) and “close the border and save Hong Kong” (yellow)*

On January 31, it was reported that 6700 members had their names signed to support the five demands, representing 8% of the total HA employees (figure 3). The low signing rate and the politics around closing the border between Hong Kong and the rest of China gave the impression the government was not responding.

As a result, the HAEA announced a five-day strike and only non-emergency service workers would be absent from duty on the first day. If the first day of the strike did not result in a positive response from the authorities, healthcare workers from all positions would then participate in the strike. In the end, all five days of the strike proceeded and orderly, non-obstructive picketing occurred at several locations (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A sit-down strike at the lobby of the Hospital Authority Building, where the negotiation take place.

### Employer's (the Hospital Authority) Action

The demands of the HAEA targeted both the Hong Kong government and their employer, the Hospital Authority. Their demand for border control requires the government to change the immigration policy; the remaining demands are related to the hospital staff's working conditions and hospital recourses. The government launched the border control policy on January 29, HA Chief Executive Officer Tony Ko said he welcomed the policies as they reduced the flow of people to Hong Kong. Furthermore, Henry Fan, the Chair of HA, urged the government to enforce stricter border control, although both also stated a lack of support for the industrial action.

On January 31, HA updated its policy that any hospital staff who require quarantine after taking care of (suspected) COVID-19 patients are able to take leave without deducting the amount of their sick leave. However, numerous hospital staff were furious at the new arrangement because this special unit of hospital staff, also known as the "Dirty Team" (see also figure 5) among peers in the healthcare sector, was formed in an urgent manner at the beginning at the pandemic; they were expecting the HA to provide a washout period but their wishes were not granted.



Figure 5 hand written Poster on the left hand side: "Sorry! I am a nurse and I am on strike. I am not afraid of frontline duties, I will join the "Dirty Team", but I worried that everyone in Hong Kong will be sent to the frontline to fight the virus. Close the border, save Hong Kong"

Despite the authority's efforts to urge workers not to engage in the strike, 50% of the non-emergency services and operations were cancelled due to the lack of staff on the first day of the industrial action. The union was able to paralyse the non-emergency service as planned. On February 4, the second day of the strike, when employees from every job position walked out, the union announced that there were at least 7000 absentees; the HA said that 4500 staff were absent. The HAEA announced that the negotiation broke down and urged workers to return to work (Figure 6). Over the following two days, 4600 and 5000 hospital workers were reported absent from duty, according to the HA.



Figure 6 A representative from the Hong Kong Hospital Authority urging medical workers to get back to their duty

The second negotiation took place in the form of a private session and was launched on the fourth day of the strike (February 6). Lasting for 1 hour and 30 minutes, the union raised eleven extra demands on top of the previous five demands approved in the HEHA's Emergency General Meeting. These demands included a provision of a washout period, compensation for infected or deceased hospital staff, sufficient uniforms for daily substitution, etc.



Figure 7 "Salute to the medical workers"

After the meeting, HAEA again pointed out that no progress had been made and expressed extreme disappointment. On the last day of the strike, HAEA attempted to make another negotiation with HA but was not answered. With hundreds of hospital staff surrounding the management's office, the management refused to meet with the workers (Figure 7). As a response, the HAEA launched an online balloting from 10 am to 4 pm: if 6000 members supported the extension of the strike, until February 12. In this vote, among the 7,000 members who participated, around 4,000 opposed continuation. The HA welcomed the decision, and the industrial action ended.

While it seems that there was no progress made during the industrial action, some of HAEA's demands were implemented weeks after the industrial action, although no credit was given to the union. After the pandemic, the HAEA continued to comment on the public health policy of the Hong Kong Government. However, in 2021, Winnie Yu, the Chairperson of the HAEA, was arrested under the national security law, specifically its provision regarding alleged subversion. She was sentenced to 6 years and 9 months in prison. On 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2022, the HAEA called for an extraordinary meeting and eventually voted to break up.

Publishing these photos will anger some, remind others of hopeful or sad times but they are a record of what happened. However, without words, they have no context but the politics is in the context and strikes are deeply political events.

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**Alex Chan Tsz Yuk** is an award-winning photojournalist in Hong Kong. He has been devoting himself to photojournalism since 2019, mainly covering news events in his home city, as well as human rights issues and global conflicts around the world. His personal website: <http://www.acfotocty.com>

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