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China

# China Intensifies Crackdown on Marxist Student Activists

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**Chinese university students, inspired by their studies of Marx, are facing an increasing state crackdown on their movement in support of workers who have been trying to organize Shenzhen's Jasic Technology. Prof. Zhun Xu analyzes the situation**

**GREG WILPERT:** It's The Real News Network and I'm Greg Wilpert, coming to you from Baltimore.

Over a dozen Marxist student activists have been arrested in Beijing, China in the past month. This is in addition to about nine student activists who have been arrested between August and October. These student activists were all involved in a solidarity campaign with workers at the Shenzhen Jasic Technology Company who had been involved in a unionization campaign. The students have been organizing in solidarity with Jasic Technology workers because the workers have been dismissed, beaten and arrested for their organizing activities, according to the group Committee for Workers International. While it is not unusual for the Chinese government to prevent independent unionization efforts, the growth of an explicitly Marxist student movement in solidarity with workers, and the repression of this movement, is a relatively new development.

Joining me now to analyze the situation of students' and workers' movement in China is Zhun Xu. He teaches economics at Howard University and is author of the book, *From Commune to Capitalism: How China's Peasants Lost Collective Farming and Gained Urban Poverty*, which was recently published by Monthly Review Press. Thanks for joining us today, Zhun Xu.

ZHUN XU: Thank you, Greg.

**GREG WILPERT:** So information on the crackdown against this relatively new student movement is fairly difficult to come by, but what can you tell us about them? Who are they, and what are they trying to achieve?

ZHUN XU: Right. So before we talk about the specific students who got arrested, I think it will be useful for us to see where they are coming from. Because back 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago, it would be unimaginable to see so-called Marxist students to support solidarity movements with the working class. Ever since China took the path of capitalism, it enjoyed years of high economic growth. And many younger students, elite college students, they were naturally sympathetic with the capitalist project, they think that this is the way that we're bringing China forward and giving freedom and prosperity to everyone in the society. But I think, starting from the 2000s, the theme has been changing, that in spite of high economic growth, China also has seen increasing inequality, corruption, as well as severe environmental damage.

That made many students, younger generations, start to rethink about the whole capitalist project that China has been doing over the last several decades. And a radical faction of those students started to read again, I mean really reread Marx, read Lenin, or read Mao, and they became self-educated Marxists in the process. So when we're talking about the students who got arrested, they are all part of, representative of the last generation of the radical students. I think over the last ten years' time, that's where they come from. Now, last year, around the same time, November, there was a group of students who got arrested because they were organizing study groups for working class in Guangdong Province in one of the colleges. So they were organizing the workers to study capital, to study how capitalism works and how they exploit people.

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And they got arrested during the process. And that was really a precursor to the recent arresting students. When that happened, there was a nationwide campaign from the leftists, and also joined by some mainstream right-wing people, that called for the government to release the students who got arrested. And that campaign, overall, was very successful because all the students who were arrested, then were released within two or three months. I think this whole campaign greatly encouraged the students, the younger generation, to think about something beyond just study groups, beyond just education. They were trying to do something more bold, more concrete. And that's part of the reason they started supporting this worker movement, including building an independent union.

But when they actually did that, there's immediate crackdowns from the police station and also the local government. Obviously, students wasn't really afraid of those, so they kept fighting and they got arrested multiple times, actually, many of them. And this one, actually, the peak of the struggle really took place in August, when about 50 to 100 students and activists, they did this daily campaign outside of the Jasic factory every day. So later on, in later August, they all got arrested. Many of them are still in detention. We don't really know much about where they are and how they're doing, but there is a group of students who went back to college, but they still keep doing the campaign and want to talk to many people about this whole thing and want more people to support the workers' movements. And I think this was what really got them arrested in the last few weeks.

**GREG WILPERT: Yeah, I actually just wanted to turn to that question of just how far can students and workers go in terms of organizing movements and organizations that are independent of the Chinese state. I mean, you already mentioned that this has been going on for a while now, but are there other movements, or is this the only one? And when they do take place, is there a crackdown almost every time?**

ZHUN XU: According to the experience from the last several years, my feeling is that as long as you confined yourself to the factory, so if you don't cause a major scene in the society, most likely the government would try to refrain from directly intervening, because they don't want to cause too much trouble. But in this particular case, when the workers got fired and the students decided to help them, they did the support group, they did the demonstration protest outside the factory and even outside the police station. So that was what really, I think, caused some of the more violent repression from the government. But this kind of protest or demonstration where the worker-student coalition, as I mentioned, has been going on for many years. Not all of them were successful, but the more gradualist approach like education groups or legal support, those are pretty widespread. I mean, so far, they were okay. But I wonder, maybe, after this kind of more radical approach has been repressed, it's possible that the government will take them for this kind of thing.

**GREG WILPERT: So President Xi Jinping recently called on the Chinese to study the work of Karl Marx. That is, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth, for example, on May 5 of this year, Xi Jinping organized a mandatory study session of the Communist Manifesto for the country's senior officials. Could one say that the president, in effect, has brought the student movement upon himself and that he shouldn't be surprised when students begin to take Marx seriously?**

ZHUN XU: I think every president, every leadership of China in the last 30 years, have been saying the same thing. They want people to study Marxism, they want people to read The Communist Manifesto seriously. But I think it was really the change in the social conditions, all the deepening of social contradictions, that led the students to self-study Marx. Obviously, when President Xi Jinping said that in a high level meeting, maybe that created some room, extra room, for college students or young people to study the classical writing more freely, that's possible. But I think now that we're actually seeing that, as you probably know, the major universities in China are trying to crack down the leading Marxist study groups. So I think it's more like this rhetoric versus reality, this kind of thing.

**GREG WILPERT: Yeah, I want to turn to the more general picture as to what's happening. I mean, you already mentioned that China has, for a long time obviously, said that it's a communist country, that it's**

inspired by Marx. And as you mentioned, however, inequality is rising, and workers have had a hard time organizing for their demands and there's growing contradictions there. But what is, more generally, how would you characterize this relationship between Marxism and the Chinese government or the Chinese state? I mean, how do they reconcile these kinds of contradictions?

ZHUN XU: Probably the contradiction can never be reconciled. Everyone living in China or studying in China can feel this tension between what is going on in reality in the society and what actually people learn from the textbooks, because the textbooks are more difficult to change. They have the legacy from the previous decades. So you still find the theory of Marxism explaining that workers would get exploited under capitalism and there are better ways to get rid of the exploitation, and et cetera. But in reality, it's a totally different kind of system. So the tension is always there.

It's a problem not just for, say, the young activists, it's also for the leadership, it's for the rich people. I mean, they also feel the tension. So it's also a struggle whether you want to keep that part of teaching in the official education system or simply get rid of it. Many people from the leadership who are the leading intellectuals already proposed from a long time ago that we should simply get rid of Marxism in the in the textbooks so that we just have a better life, we don't have to worry about anything. But to remove that part of Marxism from the teaching is it is quite radical, so it might have further social consequences. And so, I think that's part of the reason that the leadership is still very hesitant to reconcile this, to get rid of Marxism entirely. So they still keep the tension going on.

**GREG WILPERT: Okay. Well, we're going to leave it there for now. I was speaking to Professor Zhun Xu, Professor of Economics at Howard University. Thanks again, professor, for having joined us today.**

ZHUN XU: Thank you so much for inviting me.

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