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China

Jasic Struggle: Debate Among Chinese Maoists

- Features -

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Last July, 2018, 89 workers at the Shenzhen Jasic Technology Co. Ltd. demanded the right to set up a workplace union. Although over the past decade there have been a growing number of disputes and strikes by Shenzhen workers, the Jasic case is unusual because it was openly supported by a group of self-proclaimed Maoists and Marxist university students and recent graduates.

The student activists came to Shenzhen and supported the workers' demands for better working conditions, payment of back wages and social insurance along with severance pay through the establishment of a union. Coming from different parts of China, these supporters organized themselves into a "Jasic Worker Support Group" and went to stand with the Jasic workers who were battling police.

They also set up a website " which has now been removed " called "Vanguard of the Era" to publicize the Jasic case and call for support to these workers' struggles. [1]

The Jasic struggle quickly escalated from a trade union organizing drive at one plant into a political struggle against local officials. Suppression soon followed, with many arrests. Four workers are awaiting trial and 34 supporters are under house arrest, forced to repudiate their cause, or have been disappeared. Of the 34, two are from NGOs and had nothing to do with the case other than forwarding news through their mobile phones.

Almost two dozen more, upon returning to campus, have been interrogated, threatened, beaten up and in some cases expelled. As some university Marxist clubs lost their registration, a number of left-wing intellectuals, including Noam Chomsky, issued statements supporting the detained activists and announcing their intention of boycotting China's officially sponsored Marxism conferences.

More than 50 students acted in solidarity with the Jasic workers. This is in sharp contrast to what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989, when at the very beginning of the protests intellectuals and students cordoned themselves off from the workers.

Both Professor Pun Ngai at the University of Hong Kong and writer and activist Au Loong Yu have called the Jasic case, where students organized and mobilized in support of workers, of "historic significance." Au has pointed out that while individual students first came out in support of the 2009 Guangzhou sanitation workers strike, in the Jasic case the young Maoists developed "high-profile confrontational resistance," evidence of their commitment in a highly repressive situation.

While these self-proclaimed socialists in China begin from the framework of Maoism, this article's outlining of their internal debates indicate how they are grappling with strategic and tactical problems in the face of sharp repression, differences in regional conditions, and varying levels of workers' consciousness and combativity. [2]. "

The Editors of Against the Current

Roughly speaking China today has two major Maoist tendencies. One has more connections with the establishment of the regime; they favor the nationalist part of Mao's thought and love the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership for its tough stand against the West.

Another has a much more critical position on the current regime – they believe the CCP has been controlled by capitalists and the solution is proletarian revolution. [3] This second tendency prefers to identify itself as the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Left (hereinafter referred to as the MLML). [4]

According to an article published by the Red China website, the MLML emerged as a contemporary political force at the beginning of this century from various online left groups. Initially its members included veteran worker activists involved in the struggles against the privatization of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), old CCP members who did not like the capitalist reform, the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution, etc.

After 2012, the MLML was infused with fresh blood from left-wing campus groups of students and young intellectuals. The Jasic mobilization in 2018 showed that the MLML was bigger and better organized than the other left currents in China, but no evidence shows it to be a unified organization.

In fact, the heated debates triggered by the consequences of this mobilization showed that the older and younger generations of the MLML – for convenience I call them old guards and young guards in this article – have significant political and strategic disagreements.

The Jasic Incident: Brief Time Line

Many reports have described details of the Jasic incident and the related protest, mobilization and repression. This article will not repeat the whole story, but a brief time line is convenient for readers to understand the debates within the MLML.

March to July 2018: Several cases of resistance against illegal factory rules and bullying management occurred in Jasic factory in Shenzhen. Several Jasic workers decided to establish a factory union and went to seek help from the official district union branch. The latter replied that they must first gain consent from management.

July 10-18: The worker activists collected 89 signatures from their colleagues who wanted to join the proposed factory union. But these activists were fired by the management one by one with different excuses.

July 20: Seven fired workers protested outside the factory. The police came and took them away. They were physically and mentally abused in the police station. Later other workers protested outside the police station and demanded the release of the seven workers. The police detained some of these protesters.

July 21-27: Online information and mobilizing started. More protests occurred outside Jasic and police stations. The participants were mainly factory workers in Shenzhen. On the 27th the police made a mass arrest of 30 protesters, including one student.

July 28 to early August: Propaganda and mobilization escalated. Both the old and young guards of the MLML, other left currents, the labor movement across the country, and students from many universities showed solidarity in various ways. International media started reporting the incident.

The Jasic Worker Support Group (hereinafter referred to as the Support Group) was formed. More and more people came to Shenzhen to join the group, including both the young and old guards of the MLML. The local police became their main target.

August 11: The Support Group published an open letter, begging the central authority of the CCP to investigate the “reactionaries and evil forces” hiding inside the Shenzhen government. One of the on-site organizers of the Support Group, Shen Mengyu, was kidnapped in the evening, sparking another round of bulletins condemning the suppression and appeal for solidarity support.

August 24: Police raided the apartment that the Support Group rented for temporary accommodation. Sixty people were arrested, 50 of them students. Most students were released in the next two days. But some of them are still constantly harassed by their universities and local police. In other cities several MLML-related people were taken away by the police from their offices or residences on the same day.

November 9-11: At least another 18 MLML-related people were arrested across the country.

Recent Update: A number of MLML-influenced campus groups have been disciplined. Many students who joined the Support Group (including those who didn't go to Shenzhen) are under surveillance or have their student status suspended. As of mid-January this year, 36 people who were arrested during the Jasic incident are still not released.

By March 2019 at least 10 members of the Support Group had been forced to shoot confession videos, in which they claim that the Jasic incident was conspired by ultralefts as a plot to incite subversion of state power.

Criticism from the Old Guards

The old guards of the MLML are evidently unhappy about the results of the Jasic mobilization. Initially the criticism was internal, but the young guards posted their response publicly last November. Therefore, on the first day of 2019, the old guards published an open letter to the young guards on the Red China website.

The letter first alleged that the “petty bourgeois” attributes of the young guards have caused quite serious consequences, shown not only during the Jasic incident.

It stated that they pay more attention to young migrant workers but neglect SOE workers, pay more attention to coastal regions but neglect inland regions, pay more attention to capitalist legal procedures but neglect the more effective methods developed by Chinese workers in previous struggles and pay more attention to propaganda on social networks but neglect longterm organizing work among the masses.

The letter then argues that the fundamental cause of the Jasic failure is what they describe as the petty bourgeois “labor movement” route:

“First striving for the establishment of formal and open trade unions, legalized by capitalist law; then striving for capitalist democracy. In order to establish trade unions, young people who understand Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ‘theories’ must go to work in factories and mobilize workers to carry out struggle. The method of ‘struggle’ is petitioning capitalists; if the ‘struggle’ is suppressed, then petitioning the capitalist state machinery; if it is suppressed again, then appealing to the magical power of public opinion.”

The letter argues that this route might work in the West, but not in today's China. This is because China is a semi-peripheral country in the world capitalist system, and the exploitation of a large amount of cheap labor is the lifeblood of the Chinese capitalism. Thus the capitalist class won't allow workers to organize legal trade unions

universally as long as the capitalist rule is still running “normally.”

At a point when capitalist rule is crumbling in the face of a revolutionary tide, the Chinese working class may demand union rights autonomously and universally, but their demands will definitely go beyond this at that time. Therefore, the young guards’ basic demand of establishing a union at Jasic with the help of the CCP’s official union institution was illusory from the beginning.

The old guards think that the young guards made more mistakes after the initial protest of the workers was repressed by the local police. One error was hoping the pressure of leftwing solidarity and overseas public opinion could change the mind of the capitalist government.

The letter points out that the power of public opinion is very limited in today’s China. In most cases, the fate of a workers’ struggle decisively depends on the local class power relations at the time. Local capitalists and bureaucrats only make concessions when workers pose real threats to them — such as an effective strike that can cause significant economic losses or affect the promotions of local bureaucrats.

Another related mistake was blaming other people for not showing enough solidarity after the failure. The letter points out that mobilizing people to show solidarity online and go to Shenzhen did not save the struggle; instead it had exposed the MLML network and let many young lefties become the victims of state repression.

The Old Guards’ Suggestions

In their letter, the old guards outline their proposed correct route of proletarian liberation in China. They urge the young guards to shift their focus from trade union and capitalist democracy to the central issue of proletarian revolution — how to take state power.

They argue that China will never rise from a semi-peripheral country to a core country in the world capitalist system. According to their definition, core countries exploit the other countries — since China has the largest population in the world, as a whole it simply cannot exploit the other countries.

Therefore, the Chinese capitalist class will not be able to solve the future economic and political crises. This will create revolutionary momentum, but at that time the Chinese proletariat won’t have enough strength to take state power nationally. There will be a transition period of several tens of years. During this period, the proletariat will form its own party and become politically mature. Then they can take power.

However, capitalist rule is now still stable. So the old guards suggest from that the main task of the MLML is to learn the methods and experiences of struggles from the working masses, rather than trying to “inspire,” “lead” or “mobilize” workers’ struggles.

Furthermore, the young activists should go to inland instead of coastal regions. As China’s inland regions are much less economically developed, the power of the capitalist class there is relatively weak, so it will be easier to establish the revolutionary bases of the proletariat during the transition period.

Although the number of migrant workers is huge in coastal regions, they don’t have strong bonds with the local residents (in many cases the two sides also have conflicting interests), so it will be hard for them to take state power

there even during the revolutionary period.

For dealing with state repression, the old guards also give concrete suggestions. They use the example of the Maoist Reading Group Incident. [5] In another article published recently on the Red China website, the old guards claim that the rescue campaign from this incident had been led by them since January 2018.

Their strategy was to outwardly recognize the legitimacy of the state by citing the words of Xi Jinping in the petition. At the same time to appeal that the “eight youths” were Marxist-Leninists who mainly engage in social welfare activities and do not pose a political threat.

They proposed that after handing the petition to the Minister of Public Security, the four fugitives should turn themselves in to the police publicly, as a way to expand the influence of the MLML. [6]

The article concludes that these strategies had minimized the losses of the MLML in a situation where the class power balance was not in their favor. Conversely, during the Jasic incident the young guards ignored suggestions and warnings from the old guards and refused to retreat, resulting in great losses in the face of state repression.

Response from the Young Guards

Since last November, the young guards have posted a number of articles to openly respond to the above criticism and suggestions. They argue that the Jasic workers’ “union demand” was not instilled by “young leftists from petty bourgeois social background,” but self-determined corroboration gained through the workers’ daily struggles.

They also deny the old guards’ theory that the exploitation of a large amount of cheap labor will always be the mainstay of Chinese capitalism. In their opinion, economic transformation and labor shortage will gradually enlarge the space for the union movement. Thus, more and more workers will inevitably make that demand.

The young guards argue that their own position in supporting the union demand is not reformism or a petty bourgeois route “they have never thought or said that the ultimate goals were establishing legal trade unions or achieving western-style capitalist democracy. They support it because the unionized workers would be more likely to take collective actions as future class conflict becomes intensified.

They insist that protesting against the police after the first round of arrests was also the workers’ own choice, although it might have been a wrong judgment or too optimistic. They think that China’s working-class movement will inevitably develop politically in the future, thus those workers who had taken this step at present should not be discouraged.

On the issue of student mobilization, their arguments are: First, after the mass arrest on July 27, students were the only force that could continue protesting, and going to Shenzhen was their proactive choice. Second, due to the complicated and fast-changing circumstances in Shenzhen, the actions of the students were not perfect, but this cannot fundamentally negate the progressive nature of the Support Group.

Third, as activists the students will confront the violent machinery of the state sooner or later, thus their experiences during the Jasic struggle and the following repressions are useful lessons.

On the question of the coastal versus inland regions, the young guards also disagree with the old guards. They state that China now has 287 million migrant workers, comprising 70% of the working class; China's workers' struggles are most concentrated in eastern coastal regions, especially the Pearl River Delta; the working class in inland regions is small in number, not concentrated and generally less militant.

They sneer at the idea of "establishing the revolutionary bases of the proletariat inland," calling it the imagination of "armchair revolutionaries." In one article, they even denounce such suggestions from the old guards as capitulationism and "stabbing your comrades from the capitalist standpoint."

The young guards believe, although the Jasic struggle has encountered some setbacks, that it is not a total failure — it also has some achievements. For example, the Chinese discussion of social events is predominantly in the hands of the state and liberals, but the Jasic struggle made an important step in shifting it to let the masses hear the voices of the left.

The student mobilization also had proved that the tens of millions of university students are the talent pool of the Chinese left and pointed a bright direction for the left.

Continue the Struggle?

At least in appearance, the young guards of the MLML didn't accept the criticism and suggestions from old guards. In spite of the losses they suffered, they continue the struggle in their own way with great enthusiasm. As described in the Support Group's New Year Message:

"...On December 26th, the 125th birthday of Chairman Mao Zedong, four representatives of Supporting Group went to his birth place, Shaoshan. Their passionate speeches and ringing voices of songs earned the bravo from the audience. People from all parts of the country, fearless of the tricks of the authority, joined the Supporting Group for justice and provided their effort to rescue the arrested comrades..."

"Everyone of JSG (Jasic Support Group) is ready to stand with the comrades in capitalist-backed prison, and to sacrifice everything for the liberation of working class, to get ready to be arrested and put on the shackles by the dirty police in Guangdong who stand with the capitalists!" (The English version quoted here is the official translation posted by the Support Group.)

As an observer from outside, I agree that some of the criticism and suggestions from the old guards do not make sense and understand that activists cannot publicize all their strategies and tactics in an authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, some issues are still debatable.

First, social discourse in today's China is very reactionary. Chinese "Liberalism" is far from the worst part of the right — the ideas of racism, sexism, nationalism, patriarchy and bureaucratism also have stronger influences than the left-wing ideas in general.

In this environment, ultraleft slogans may turn off some of the left-leaning youths. For example, how many young students or workers are sincerely ready to "sacrifice everything for the liberation of working class" or "be arrested and put on the shackles by the dirty police" — especially so when they are aware that their sacrifice would not have brought any benefit for the workers whose interest they are committed to serve?

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Moreover, since many of those who want to make such sacrifices are in jail now, who is going to recruit and train more left-wing youths? Articles on social media probably won't be able to substitute the offline organizing work.

Secondly, if the Guangdong government is controlled by capitalists and reactionaries, is the one in Beijing our comrade? I think we have to realize that regardless of the factional fights within the ruling class, they share a common ground that all working class resistances in all parts of China should be suppressed.

The central government in Beijing sometimes poses the "we-love-workers-and-poor" gesture, but this is just its division of labor in the "good cops and bad cops" game. The left should not send a message to the masses that some Big Brothers are on our side to the masses, even when it is for the purpose of rescuing your comrades.

Thirdly, the coastal-or-inland debate is not a black-or-white question. If some people can organize or establish contacts with workers in inland regions, just do it; if the others find it is easier to build groups in the Pearl River Delta they should go ahead with it.

This is not a matter of principle. There are many universities in inland cities that are also industrialized, such as Wuhan and Chongqing; there are also big SOEs and traditional type working class in coastal cities such as Shanghai.

Let's imagine a scenario: a leftwing student goes to college in Wuhan and engages in activities in support of local workers; after graduation she moves to Shenzhen to join a group who share the same politics, while some of her left-wing mates choose to stay and keep working with the local workers.

After some incidents, she is blacklisted by the Guangdong police and constantly harassed there; then she goes back to her hometown where the repression is not so severe, and starts contacting the local leftists... This scenario is probably the more natural and practical answer for the young leftists in today's China.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] Currently the Jasic Workers Support Group official website, probably run from somewhere outside the country, is [here](https://jiashiqrsyt1.github.io/) <https://jiashiqrsyt1.github.io/>.

[2] To sign a petition calling for the release of jailed labour rights activists exercising rights to freedom of association for the Jasic workers and supporters, go [to https://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=4078](https://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=4078).

[3] In the past some of them also hoped that the Maoist faction in the party would capture the highest power and turn the country to their preferable path. The fall of Bo Xilai broke this hope.

[4] The Chinese liberals and far-right often refer to Maoists as "Mao Zuo." This term can cause confusion. The literal English translation is "Maoist left," which distinguishes Maoists from the other leftists. But people also translate this term into "left-wing Maoists," which indicates there are right-wing Maoists. For the liberals and far-right, "left" is a bad word, so this term is generally used in a disrespectful way. The non-Maoist leftists use this term as well, but the implications are complicated. Some people think all the Maoists are Stalinists, calling them "Mao Zuo" is to hint that they are deceptive. Others treat the left-wing Maoists in a more comradely way and believe that they could be allies in many struggles; thus they refer the left-wing Maoists as "Mao Zuo" to distinguish them from the pro-establishment Maoists. In order to eliminate confusion, in this article I use their own term "Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Left," to refer the left-wing Maoists

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[5] In November 2017, cops raided a reading group held at the Guangdong University of Technology. Four participants were arrested and another four became fugitives. In their open letters published later, some of them identify themselves as the MLML. A rescue campaign was launched nationally. By March 2018, the Guangdong police had dropped the charges and all of the eight youths had been freed.

[6] As it turned out, the Guangdong police dropped the charges before the fugitives were convinced to do so.