

# China's Workers Aren't Fighting a Trade War—They're Fighting a Labor War

Tuesday 9 October 2018, by [CHEN Michelle](#) (Date first published: 4 September 2018).

## **Bellicose pronouncements from Washington and crackdowns from Beijing aren't stifling China's labor movement.**

The bellicose news headlines that are spewed daily from the Trump administration might give the impression that most Chinese workers are engaged in just one occupation: collectively sucking the wealth out of America and heaping it into Beijing's bottomless coffers [1]. But a closer look at China's workforce reveals that most workers are actually busy dealing with issues closer to home. Take the case of the workers at Jasic Technology's factory, who are preoccupied not with Trump's global trade war but with battling for control of their own workplace.

In July, Jasic, a large welding-machinery plant in the southern city of Shenzhen, erupted in protest after the managers tried to thwart a unionization campaign [2] waged by local workers with support from student labor activists [3]. The workers had complained of being treated "like slaves," [4] robbed of wages, and subjected to "illegal last-minute adjustment of employees' schedules, an illegal system of fines, underpayment of employees' housing funds, and the illegal compilation of a blacklist divulging employees' information." Initially, the organizers believed they could move forward with unionizing after gaining the approval of the local branch of China's official labor organization, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). On July 23, the local Pingshan district branch of the union announced that a deal had been reached to establish a formal union at the Jasic plant.

However, the management soon showed it was less than pleased with the prospect of having to collectively bargain with workers, and below the surface a few business-friendly union officials seemed to agree. So the next day brought yet another shock: a lockout of protesting workers as they cried, "We want to be reinstated! We want to unionize!"

According to the Hong Kong-based watchdog group *China Labour Bulletin*, Mi Jiuping, a worker and organizer for the Jasic factory, declared in a "now deleted" social-media post: "Is unionising illegal, evil or frightening?... nobody can stop us from building our own union, nobody can destroy our solidarity."

The standoff has gotten more attention than other worker protests in the country [5], but such clashes are not unusual in the boom-bust tumult of China's new coastal manufacturing towns. Shenzhen is a crown jewel of China's new economic model, one of Guangdong Province's Special Economic Zones [6], built on an influx of low-wage rural labor. But recent years have brought a slowdown in urban development in the city [7], paralleled by increasingly precarious labor conditions [8].

The Jasic workers' advocates report that authorities have been brutally suppressing the organizing efforts "by illegally transferring the employees to different posts," [9] then firing and "defaming" them. Police have reportedly attacked and arrested workers, galvanizing a group of "concerned

students” to mobilize in a solidarity campaign that has since spread nationwide [10].

According to Jenny Chan, a labor scholar based in Hong Kong, during this summer break, students from more than a dozen universities “have joined hands with the Jasic workers” by launching online petition drives [11], establishing legal-aid clinics, and collaborated on local grassroots organizing with activists from the migrant-worker-advocacy center [12]. Their radicalism might even defy [13] the warnings of university officials and professors [14].

For those studying the law, Chan adds, the real-life struggles of the workers are a place to apply the lessons of the classroom: “It’s a contested space—putting the law into practice—the leading students are supporting Jasic workers to strengthen their associational power in the form of a trade union.”

Although many of the earlier detainees have been released, tensions have escalated with further arrests and the alleged kidnapping of a local activist [15], Shen Mengyu. Colleagues say she was snatched by the police in August near the factory. But the authorities have denied that the incident was an abduction, telling Reuters the incident was “a matter regarding a family dispute.”

The police crackdown in Pingshan reflects President Xi Jinping’s aggressive agenda of imposing political order and consolidating his executive power through tight social controls. Pacifying civil-society activism is seen as critical for Beijing’s economic agenda as it seeks to build out its investments across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa—all the while thwarting a trade war with the United States. Since Xi also recently expanded his office by ensuring his virtual “presidency for life,” the infrastructure of repression has tightened its grip on social movements and political dissent [16], deploying extensive surveillance and censorship across civil society and the media.

Yet labor observers say that worker unrest, in the form of strikes and protests [17], has not been significantly chilled by state pressure. According to Geoffrey Crothall of *China Labour Bulletin*, aggrieved employees with or without union representation “often have no choice but to take collective action in order to get their voices heard and for their grievances to be addressed. There are simply too many protests for the authorities to clamp down on, and since the vast majority of cases involve workers demanding what they are legally entitled to (their wages, for example), repressive action would be counterproductive.”

And eventually protests often do get the goods. Despite the lack of official channels for advocacy, rabble-rousing workers have successfully wrested concessions through workplace activism [18], sometimes with support from local officials who also have an interest in busting bad bosses. In many disputes that have been resolved through direct negotiations, Crothall adds, “it is safe to say that the local government officials would not have got involved at all unless the workers had staged collective protests.”

Meanwhile, students’ radical solidarity campaigns [19]—a bold challenge to officials who have castigated the Jasic movement—show that labor rights and democracy can no longer be thought of as separate pillars of civil society. Chan sees the uprising in Shenzhen as a sign that workers are joining an increasingly educated, politically awakened generation of students, to fight for political freedom and economic security as twin fundamentals of a modern Chinese future [20]:

*“University students share concerns about fair labor in an age of contracting and temporary work. They identify with Jasic workers that a functioning union that wins the trust and confidence of workers is a worthy effort of workers and students.”*

The unyielding battle for social and economic justice from the bottom-up at Jasic and other workplaces has written a new page in contemporary Chinese society.”

The worker-student solidarity shows that the next chapter of China's rise could be co-authored by a movement of labor and intelligentsia, jointly creating a new political language for the world's largest working class.

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- THE NATION, SEPTEMBER 4, 2018:  
<https://www.thenation.com/article/chinas-workers-arent-fighting-a-trade-war-theyre-fighting-a-labor-war/>
  - Michelle Chen is a contributing writer for The Nation.
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## **Footnotes**

- [1] <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/08/trump-executive-dinner-bedminster-china-766609>
- [2] <https://www.ozy.com/fast-forward/a-new-young-rebellion-is-brewing-in-china/88501>
- [3] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-labour-protests-insight/chinas-student-activists-cast-rare-light-on-brewing-labor-unrest-idUSKBN1L0060>
- [4] <https://www.clb.org.hk/content/shenzhen-worker-activists-determined-unionise-despite-dismissal>
- [5] <https://www.clb.org.hk/content/police-raid-student-group-support-shenzhen-jasic-workers-grow>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/may/10/story-of-cities-39-shenzhen-from-rural-village-to-the-worlds-largest-megalopolis>
- [7] <https://www.scmp.com/business/article/2146647/all-signs-point-impending-economic-slowdown-china>
- [8] <http://www.chinoiresie.info/chinas-labour-movement-in-transition/>
- [9] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2158991/chinese-maoists-join-students-fight-workers-rights>
- [10] <http://www.rc44labour.org/scholars-demand-the-shenzhen-government-release-jasic-workers-arrested-for-attempting-to-unionize-30-july-2018/>
- [11] ESSF (article 46422), [China: An open letter from scholars to the Shenzhen Government and Federation of Trade Unions regarding violence against workers attempting to form a union at Jasic Technology in Pingshan District.](#)

- [12] ESSF (article 45835), [Jasic factory workers “incident” in Shenzhen \(China\): Hong Kong based labour organisation answers Beijing official report.](#)
- [13] <https://zhichishengyuan01.github.io/zihan/>
- [14] <http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201808/27/WS5b8359aca310add14f387e29.html>  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-labour-protests-insight/chinas-student-activists-cast-rare-light-on-brewing-labor-unrest-idUSKBN1L0060>
- [15] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-labour-protests/student-activists-disappear-in-southern-china-after-police-raid-idUSKCN1L90YL>
- [16] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43198404>
- [17] <https://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>
- [18] <https://www.clb.org.hk/content/2015-2017-workers-movement-china-2015-2017-new-report-clb>
- [19] <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/08/no-one-can-resist-the-tides-of-history-detained-activist-yue-xin-on-the-jasic-workers/>
- [20] ESSF (article 45882), [Freedom of association, TUs and Shenzhen Jasic Technology: Towards a Worker-Student Coalition in China.](#)