

Seeing through Muddied Waters, Part 1: Jasic, Strikes & Unions (China)

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Contents

- [About a speech by Pun Ngai \(...\)](#)
- [Jasic, Strikes and Worker \(...\)](#)
- [Unionization](#)

Commentators ranging from academic celebrities such as Noam Chomsky (1.1) and Slavoj Žižek (1.2) to some of the world's top China labor scholars have hailed "*the Jasic Conflagration*" as an event of "*historic significance*" or even "*the most important labor conflict to occur in China in the past decade.*" (1.3) But what was this event, exactly?

- For many, the Jasic Struggle refers primarily to a (fictional) "*strike*" at a welding equipment plant in Shenzhen last summer.
- More realistically, it could refer to the efforts of several employees there to form a union, their protests at the factory gates demanding reinstatement after they were fired, and the initial days of unusually politicized protest against the police after they were arrested briefly on July 20th until they and a couple dozen supporters were placed under criminal detention. (2)
- More broadly, it could be expanded (sometimes as "the Jasic Movement") to include the months-long, nationwide support campaign that snowballed in response to those events and subsequent waves of repression.

The campaign involved Marxist student organizations at some of China's top universities, networks of elderly Maoists, and at least a few politically minded workers.

Key events have been documented in detail elsewhere, (3) but a comprehensive and frank account may have to wait until the dust has settled just to get the facts straight, let alone glean any political lessons from all of this. The scale of the repression, while not unprecedented, is certainly severe. Placing it alongside the more recent (January (3.1), March (3.2) and May (3.3) multi-city, apparently coordinated raids on at least five left-wing labor groups and media platforms, with members from at least four being arrested or disappeared (3.4), it appears there is yet another wave of attacks underway targeting leftists, at least some of whose members were also involved in Jasic solidarity activities. However, it is Jasic itself that has remained the focus of renewed debate about class struggle in China today, both domestically and internationally.

One point of interest about this debate is how it has projected certain claims and hopes onto the Jasic incident, and how it has tried to clarify what Jasic does and does not say about the nature of class struggle in China today.

To be clear, we certainly have no interest in condemning the actions of those involved or the student support networks. Our purpose in writing this commentary is not to simply rehash the various positions in this debate or to take a side within it, but instead to recognize that the true object of inquiry here is not so much the (in reality, quite small) events that transpired at the Jasic plant, but instead this debate itself. This re-focusing of the question will allow us to explore the deeper limitations of the leftist orientation to the Jasic Struggle in the months since July 2018 and what this

says about the current character of class conflict in China.

From the beginning, the basic facts of the case have been distorted.

Those who hoped to support the movement told half-truths, perhaps to protect those involved, and perhaps to advance certain political images. Fascination with Jasic has clouded judgment so much that it has been made the assumed cause behind other, probably unrelated arrests of important activists. (4)

The campaign has absorbed so much attention that there is a risk of disorientation.

Nearly a year on, it has become clear that Jasic was not the harbinger of a new era of class struggle, as many claimed at first. While international solidarity efforts have rushed to the support of the activists—in an understandable and largely justifiable show of concern—a recurring question in debates among leftists inside China has been: **was a little media attention worth all the repression, prison time and probably torture of many activists involved?** (5)

On the other hand, while the movement had little to do with workers or class struggle, it was clearly an important phenomenon in its own right, so it is definitely worth deepening our understanding of the events and various groups involved. (6)

Since the disturbance at the Jasic factory last July, we have been cautious of drawing connections between the incident and domestic political factions, or of criticizing the dubious media narratives about the incident. The constantly changing, highly volatile and high-risk situation that developed made it difficult to make a clear-headed and principled assessment of what was unfolding, or to write about them in a way that wouldn't risk making things worse for people involved.

Now that at least four detainees treated by the state as principally responsible for the "plot" have already been convicted, and the movement seems to have broken down into multiple warring factions, we believe the time has come to begin clarifying the facts and analyzing their significance through a combination of translations, interviews and original writings.

About a speech by Pun Ngai (April in New York)

As a first step in this direction, we respond here to a recent speech by the prominent China labor academic and left activist Pun Ngai, professor of anthropology at Hong Kong University and co-director of the HKU-Cornell Global China Program on Labor and Migration.

On April 12th, the Program hosted a public symposium in New York called "The Jasic Conflagration: Assessing the State of Labor Politics in China," and a video of Pun Ngai's speech (6.1) there was published online. We choose this as a convenient point of entry, since such statements by Pun and her followers have probably exerted more influence than anything else on how the Jasic Movement has been framed ever since it began in July 2018—from mainstream news media in Chinese (outside of the mainland of course), English and other languages to left-wing attempts to make sense of things and offer solidarity.

In short, Pun Ngai's speech claims that the Jasic Struggle points the way forward for China's labor movement along the sightline of a certain Maoist politics, where class struggle, reclaiming communism, and "*mass line*" tactics will unite students, workers, peasants and other social factions in a new left political pole, based on the revival of some of China's 20th century political heritage. (7)

However, in her defense of the movement, Pun distorts some of the basic facts of the Jasic case and misrepresents broader trends in social conflict.

At least two claims are worth addressing:

(a) the claim that strikes are increasing in frequency and

(b) that the Jasic workers' call to unionize were part of a rising trend.

Correcting these distortions offers a good first step for a broader analysis, since it allows us to determine the actual character of the initial events that ultimately set everything in motion, while also providing a case study of one way that events have been distorted by a certain group of actors after the fact.

Jasic, Strikes and Worker Actions Today

Pun does not name her source when she claims in her speech that strikes have “*doubled*,” or over what period of time this supposedly occurred, but in her August 2018 article in the Hong Kong newspaper Mingpao, she claimed that this doubling had occurred every year since 2010. (8)

The only consistent sources of worker strikes and protests that we know of are

(a) China Labour Bulletin (CLB)’s strike map and

(b) the shorter-lived Wickedonna blog. (9)

If there are more comprehensive sources available, all of us would benefit from them being made public.

According to CLB statistics, from 2018 to March 2019, just before Pun spoke in April, there were 2,067 worker actions. Only around 273 incidents were strikes, or just 13 percent. Compare this to statistics from five years earlier, in 2014, when there were 596 strikes of 1,358 incidents, making strikes 41 percent of all actions—meaning that there were both more strikes five years ago in absolute terms, and that they composed a greater share of all incidents. While worker actions do seem to have increased, for several years, strikes have in fact been declining as a portion of total worker actions. These actions tend to take many other forms, including protests, road blockages and public threats of suicide, to name a few.

It’s worth noting that (regardless of the time period) the “*strike*” is but one form of action taken by workers, and is no means the dominant form, though many instinctively assume it is. In fact, the incidents at the Jasic factory in Shenzhen never involved a strike at all, and neither the workers nor the support groups ever claimed that the workers were on strike.

This did not stop prominent English media from **misreporting it as a “*strike*”** action, as the Financial Times did on 1 August (9.1) and 21 January, (9.2) South China Morning Post did on 28 August (9.3), or the Nation did on 4 September, (9.4) or any number of left wing blogs and news sites like New Bloom on 31 July (0.5) and Revolutionary Socialism Media on 23 August (9.6)—the list could continue.

It is important to highlight this mistake, and pause for a moment to ask why it is made. Pun herself never claims the Jasic incident involved a strike, though she chooses to quote strike statistics as a barometer of worker militancy and/or political awareness.

There is a common assumption that spans what we might call the **labor-leaning tendency in contemporary left-wing thought** (including anarcho-syndicalists, trade unionists and most importantly the new wave of social democrats) that the proper mode of “*real*” action is the strike, that strikes among manufacturing and logistics workers are a greater driving force in history than strikes among other workers, and that such labor struggles should somehow progress naturally through ill-defined activist/movementist stages to trade unionism, and then, perhaps, on to syndicalist, social democratic or left-wing party politics.

These presumptions are simultaneously projected backward until they appear to be the true trajectory of historical left-wing politics of the past. (10) This historically inaccurate representation of the workers’ movement is then used to justify a particularly schematic and fundamentally delimited prescription for the future of class struggle as it exists today. Most relevant here, however, is the way in which these presumptions are used to craft a sort of movementist mirage over real

events in order to bolster the faith of an often distant audience. Such sermons, broadcast over social media, soon rise to such a volume that all else is drowned out, obscuring the basic facts of what has happened and what it really might portend. (11)

Unionization

Pun's claim that Jasic represents a growing trend is also a gross error, and most likely a somewhat intentional distortion of the facts to produce a narrative that unionization is the proper next step for China's workers.

Others have noted oddities of Pun's claims about Jasic, and her portrayal of the unionization campaign, as **Au Loong Yu** did in last January's issue *Made in China* (11.1):

Professor Pun goes on to make two other points that I have reservations about.

- Firstly, she commends the incident as having a second historical significance in that for 'the first time the workers consciously organised a trade union.'

The reality is that there have been numerous cases of workers going on strike to demand the re-electing or establishment of workplace unions. (12)

*For example, as early as 2004-05, workers at the Shenzhen Japanese company **Uniden** went on strike five times in one year. They finally succeeded in setting up a union but it was quickly suppressed. Other examples were the **Ole Wolff** case in Yantai in 2006, the **Yantian Container** strike of 2007, and last but not least, the Nanhai **Honda** strike of 2010.*

- Secondly, she remarks that 'the actions of the Jasic workers also show that Chinese workers have already transformed from purely economic subjects into political subjects with class consciousness.' True, the protest was initially quite promising. The factory has just over a thousand workers. So the fact that 89 workers signed on to request that a labour union be established—with 20 remaining in the struggle after the crackdown—is significant, particularly considering the difficulty of labour organising in this type of context (Zhang 2018).

However, is it possible to conclude that the average Chinese worker has become a 'political subject with class consciousness' based on the actions of a less than 100 people in a single workplace?

Au's critique is not incorrect, but does not go nearly far enough.

Indeed, there are occasionally workplace related actions that involve the union, but they are exceedingly rare. **Cases of union-related demands, like reelection of union representatives for example, make up just 0.001 percent of all worker actions in China**, according to the more than 10,000 incidents recorded by China Labour Bulletin between 2011 and 2018.

Moreover, the most noteworthy strikes and protests that involved unionization demands were generally a sign of intervention by some sort of outside organization, like a local labor NGO, or as in the case of Jasic, but also other cases, (13) national Maoist political networks.

It is well documented that large networks of Walmart workers in China, (14) for example, were developed with the aid of NGOs, which helped facilitate some of their actions and provided legal support for workers. Their protracted battle to reform their union was in no small part due to the direction provided by NGOs and worker organizations with international connections.

Union elections are commonly on the list of objectives for labor NGOs who pick up labor dispute cases. But is certainly not the trend of Chinese labor actions as such: Taking another look at China Labour Bulletin's statistics, there were precisely six incidents in the 2067 cases between 2018 and March of 2019 that had anything at all to do with unions, including the Jasic case, and not even all of them are demands for union elections or the like. In one case construction workers are protesting unpaid wages owed by the trade union itself.

Putting aside the question of whether **trade union reform** in China is viable or even desirable, it

should at least be acknowledged that within the really existing forms of worker organization in China today, such a consideration is **rarely the consideration of workers themselves**. It is instead almost always derived from some exogenous force, as was often the case in the Pearl River Delta over the past decade or so, where labor NGOs have consistently sought to inject labor struggles with these secondary political dimensions in accord with their own fantasies of how the “labor movement” should look (based on a symmetrical myth of how it looked in the past). In the case of the Jasic incident, however, the choice of **the union demand appears to be the result of a strategic consideration of particular Maoists groups who**, like NGOs, chose this as an object of struggle.

Historically, the process is aided by the fact that the official trade union (the ACTFU) plays such a distant, bureaucratic role in workers’ lives.

Unlike Western attempts to build grassroots “rank-and-file” organizations **within existing unions, there is simply no mass organization for workers to even consider “taking back” or “revitalizing.”**

This itself is a clear sign that this sort of trade union strategy derives from the analysis of NGOs and/or domestic groups based on political affinity rather than concrete activity, such as student leftists or China’s various Maoist factions. And it is these domestic networks that we will turn to in subsequent posts.

Notes :

1. Image: Bobby Yip *“Migrant workers play snooker after work in Dadun village in Zengcheng near the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou June 20, 2011, one week after militia fired tear gas in this factory town to quell rioting over the abuse of a pregnant street hawker who became a symbol of simmering grassroots discontent”*

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-migrants/special-reportchina-migrant-unrest-exposes-generation-faultline-idUSTRE75S0PU20110629>

This was the riot discussed at the start of our piece “No Way Forward, No Way Back” in *Chuang* #1: Dead Generations. <http://chuangcn.org/journal/one/>

1.1 Noam Chomsky <https://www.ft.com/content/68dea512-f21f-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d>

1.2 Slavoj Žižek

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/china-missing-marxists-communists-dissidents-students-beijing-peking-university-a8657621.html>

1.3 *“the most important labor conflict to occur in China in the past decade.”*

Elie Friedman, Pun Ngai, Sophie Chen: *New Alliance of Students-Workers in Struggle of Union Formation: The Case of Jasic Conflict* - VIDEO 2019-04-03).

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52392>

2. There have been several on the Chinese left who have pointed out that at least some of the organizing workers themselves had backgrounds in certain Maoist networks, rather than simply inspiring support from those networks after the protests.

One of the earliest observations to this effect was made by Qiu Huo in the immediate aftermath of the week-long demonstrations in Shenzhen leading to mass arrests on 27 July. He also called to attention strange tactics employed, such as the decision to give lengthy political speeches at the

local police station.

An early summary of Qiu Huo's analysis is presented in his "19 points on the Jasic Incident": 19点, "19点", <https://matters.news/@1399068281/19点19点>
<https://matters.news/@1399068281/19点19点>
<https://matters.news/@1399068281/19点19点>

3. The most detailed English account of the factory events we know of is still "Preliminary Thoughts on the Shenzhen Jasic Events" by Shannon Lee, 17 September 2018.

<https://wolfs smoke.wordpress.com/2018/09/17/jasic/>

For the workers' own official account of these events, see their July 23 petition we translated in "Unionists vs. the union: letters from the July 20th Incident in Pingshan."

<http://chuangcn.org/2018/07/pingshan-letters/>

Subsequent events outside the factory (centered on college campuses, police stations and social media) have been documented in numerous news reports and compiled on "Global Support for Disappeared Left Activists in China."

<https://www.facebook.com/supportjasicworkers/>

For a concise timeline of events from March 2018 to March 2019, see "Jasic Struggle: Debate among Chinese Maoists" by Qian Ben-li, Solidarity-US.org.

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article48753>

For a more detailed timeline through last September, see "Chronologie zu den Kämpfen der Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter bei Jasic Technology und ihren Unterstützerinnen" from Labournet.de (German only). http://www.labournet.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/jasic_chronologie.pdf

3.1 January

<http://redballoonsolidarity.org/3592/>

3.2 March

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3002732/chinese-labour-rights-activists-detained-authorities-try-shut>

3.3 May

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3009903/three-more-people-detained-china-continues-crack-down-labour>

3.4 disappeared <https://twitter.com/FeministChina/status/1132303542411304961>

4. Kevin Lin, in his most recent op-ed in the Made In China journal, questions whether the mass arrests of NGO workers Wu Guijun, Zhang Zhiru and others in January, or the arrest of 'New Generation' editor Wei Zhili and his colleagues, are in fact related to the crackdown around the Jasic incident, as some claim. "State Repression in the Jasic Aftermath: From Punishment to Preemption", Made in China, 18 April 2019,

<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/04/18/state-repression-in-the-jasic-aftermath-from-punishment-to-preemption/>

5. One dimensions of this debate is summarized in "Jasic Struggle: Debate among Chinese Maoists" by Qian Ben-li, Solidarity-US.org.

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article48753>

This, however, reflects only two of many factions among Maoists and other left perspectives active in China now.

We hope to address more of this political terrain in future writings, translations and interviews.

Regarding the question of whether the movement was worth the repression, in a recent interview with Pun Ngai

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52352> responding to criticisms from mainland

leftists, she was asked whether her actions served to get people arrested rather than actually deepening the struggle. She responded that, while this doesn't make sense for an individual labor action, sacrifice of the whole student network may be "worth it" if that helps to "push forward a larger politicized movement."

6. We would like to make clear that this is neither an endorsement nor an outright condemnation of the entire political landscape of those involved, or caught up in, the Jasic Movement. This is also not our final assessment of the question of Maoists in China, and their role in this event. We are attempting to understand the complex organization of these bodies for our own benefit and for that of others searching for allies, or simply trying to understand what's going on. From the start, however, we would like to remind readers not to focus too much on the "Maoist" identity of those involved in or supporting this movement, as the state has already targeted other Maoist factions and even Trotskyists known for openly criticizing the Jasic camp, perhaps lumping them all together as potential rivals on the same terrain of Marxist-Leninist ideology, or maybe just collecting information about overlapping personal networks.

7. In the interview <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52352> mentioned in a footnote above, Pun Ngai also doubles down on the effort to represent Jasic as a rebirth of the spirit of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, and the beginning of a potential overcoming of the split between students and workers manifested in the 1989 Tiananmen Movement (a split explored in "*Tiananmen and the March into the Institutions*," <http://chuangcn.org/2019/06/tiananmen-square-the-march-into-the-institutions/> from our article "Red Dust" in Chuang #2: Frontiers

8. 中國工人運動的未來 2018年8月7日

9. The pros, cons and political significance of these and other sources are explored in "Picking Quarrels," Chuang #2: Frontiers, 2019. <http://chuangcn.org/journal/two/>

9.1 Financial Times did on 1 August
<https://www.ft.com/content/8cad5b66-960b-11e8-b67b-b8205561c3fe>

9.2 Financial Times 21 January,
<https://www.ft.com/content/cb75f628-1d38-11e9-b126-46fc3ad87c65>

9.3 South China Morning Post 28 August
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2161701/hong-kong-labour-rights-group-denies-mainland-chinese-media>

9.4 The Nation did on 4 September,
<https://www.thenation.com/article/chinas-workers-arent-fighting-a-trade-war-theyre-fighting-a-labor-war/>

9.5 Number of left wing blogs and news sites like New Bloom on 31 July
<https://newbloommag.net/2018/07/31/jasic-struggle-shenzhen/>

9.6 Revolutionary Socialism Media, 23 August
<https://revosocialistmedia.wordpress.com/2018/08/23/solidarity-with-the-jasic-technology-factory-workers/>

the list could continue.

10. On the difference between such myths and the realities of the historical workers' movement, see "A History of Separation" <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/4/en/endnotes-preface> from Endnotes #4.

- in French <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52387>