The Jasic Struggle in China's Political Context

written by Au Loong Yu | February 2, 2019

The Jasic case, in particular relationships that were forged between students and workers, reveals important developments in China's politics. China's 1989 democratic movement saw intellectuals and students excluding workers from the very beginning. After the failure of that democratic movement, intellectuals soon divided into liberals and the New Left, cleaved by the false dichotomy of "state versus market." Intellectuals may have adopted New Left rhetoric about "fairness" but remained indifferent to workers' situation. Students simply retreated to their study. It was not until the 2009 strikes by Guangzhou sanitation workers that workers began to receive some support from students, mostly as individuals. Small circles of leftist students had started debating and practicing *ronggong*, literally "mixing with workers," that is, going to work in factories after graduation and trying to organize there. Key to this development has been the role of students who identify themselves as Maoists.

At the turn of this century, some older Maoists in the North were active behind the scenes in resisting the privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), viewing SOE workers as having more revolutionary potential. This older generation of Maoists invited rural migrant activists and students to their classes and training but did not view rural migrants as having sufficiently advanced political consciousness. After Maoists splintered in 2012 following a failed effort to push the party to the left, one wing became more vocal in criticizing the party, arguing a qualitative capitalist change had taken place. They became more explicit in appealing for resistance from below, although they continue to try to win over leading party cadres, invoking the "socialist" principles enshrined in the constitution or in Mao's legacy. Thus the Jasic struggle represents a new generation of Maoist students interested in workers, and this time they are working with rural migrant workers in the South. This new generation of young Maoists has also changed tactics, choosing high-profile resistance and support for the Jasic workers, which is very unusual given the highly repressive political situation in China. During the height of the Jasic campaign, old and young Maoist supporters carried photos of Chairman Mao and called for support "for the sake of working class's awakening, for the sake of Chairman Mao!"[1] Another Maoist supporter published an article, "Where Has Janggangshan Gone? On the Jasic Struggle and Revolutionary Revival,"[2] linking the Jasic struggle to Jinggangshan, the mountain where Mao first established his guerilla base in 1927. Although the escalation of the Jasic struggle from a workplace trade union organizing drive to a political struggle against the local officials has been described by some as an indication of the political transformation of Chinese workers' consciousness, that seems too bold a claim. It is also doubtful that making a direct comparison between Jinggangshan, a symbol for guerilla warfare, and the Jasic workers is really helpful to the latter's struggle.

Although the Maoists have accumulated a lot of experience in the North in supporting the rights of

SOE workers, their experiences cannot be directly applied to the private enterprises of the South without substantial modification. When the SOEs underwent privatization, the workers sometimes directly confronted corrupt local officials, as they were the criminals who were directly responsible for the theft of public property. Therefore, workers' actions often began with political resistance and called on the revolutionary ethos of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a spiritual basis. This was natural and was even sometimes useful. But in the private companies of the South, it is different. The conflict is chiefly between the employees and the employers. Moreover, the revolutionary ethos of the CCP is less likely to resonate with migrant workers, and so if actions escalate into political resistance those workers are less likely to be motivated. Surely in the Jasic case, as in many other cases, when the local government cracked down on workers then the struggle could potentially have become political. But to escalate the struggle one must also ask whether workers are fully prepared for a political confrontation. Experiences already tell us that they were not.

The state paid no attention at all to the Maoists' appeal to the "socialist" principle or to Mao. Though Xi Jinping continues to demand the people learn from Marxism-Leninism and Mao's thought, the state continues to crack down on any independent and collective effort at seriously studying left classics—and to crack down even harder when these efforts carry an aspiration to sympathize with working people. This should not surprise us. Back in 2004, the Zhengzhou police arrested and charged local Maoists who tried to assemble to pay tribute to Mao. Maoist website Red China had placed their hope for a left turn within the CCP led by Bo Xilai. Minqi Li, a Chinese scholar currently lives and teaches in USA and also the theoretician of the Red China, argues in his book that Bo represented "the last significant faction that was in opposition to neoliberal capitalism", and that "by purging Bo Xilai from the party, Communist Party leadership may have foregone their last and best opportunity to resolve China's rapidly escalating economic and social contradictions in a relatively peaceful manner."[3]

The "Social Democrats"

About three years ago, liberal left labor activists suffered a similar crackdown. On December 3, 2015, the state arrested eight activists from four labor groups and later prosecuted and sentenced four of them. This was to curb these groups' campaigning for collective bargaining, an effort supported by China Labor Bulletin (CLB), an NGO in Hong Kong founded by Han Dongfang, a worker leader in the 1989 democratic movement. That year also saw the arrest of more than a hundred lawyers for the "crime" of making a legal defense for prosecuted dissidents.

With the tremendous growth in the number of rural migrant workers and their spontaneous strikes since 2000, a new current of liberals emerged. On top of calling for constitutionalism and civil liberties, they began to support rural migrant workers and call for the three basic labor rights (the rights to freedom of association and to strike as well as to collective bargaining). From a labor perspective, this is a step forward. One of their main writers was Wang Jiangsong. He, along with Han, described themselves as "social democrats," a term that should be treated with care in the China context, for reasons explained later. He criticized the capitalists for being "too dependent (on the party officials)," "never daring to fight for their civil rights, and only being interested in bribing officials, either actively or passively." He contrasts the ability of rural migrant workers, understood as the new working class, to organize democratically to fight for their rights.[4]

The social democrats, however, did not support the SOE workers' struggle against privatization earlier—or at most confined themselves to calling for better compensation—something the Maoists never forgave nor forgot. Unlike the Maoists, they opposed the "socialist tradition" of the 1949 revolution and saw the SOE workers as privileged, conservative, and alien. In contrast, rural migrant workers, who do not share the political consciousness of SOE workers, are now considered by the

social democrats as both super-exploited and the new social bearer of changes, although previously the social democrats, or liberals in general, mainly looked to party leaders like former premier Wen Jiabao as agents of change.

Han Dongfang has long dropped his previous position of campaigning for independent unions and has argued instead for reform within the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. In 2013, Han saw Xi Jinping's speech for ACFTU reform as a signal of real pro-worker change. In March 2015, Wang Jiangsong initiated a campaign for collective bargaining and was endorsed by 15 labor NGOs and a hundred individuals. This campaign was also supported by CLB and helped to spread the idea of collective bargaining among workers. Yet in June of the same year, Han spoke at the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives, reassuring the audience that "President Xi was going in the right direction with his very important 3rd Plenum Decision in 2013." He observed, "It is not in the CCP's interests to crack down on civil society," and, "This is the first time in the history of modern China that the interests of the CCP and the workers have been fully and beneficially aligned." To help the CCP go in that direction, Han said he was prepared to "depoliticize an overly politicized labor issue" by "targeting workplace collective bargaining, rather than freedom of association."[5] However, the state replied to Han's goodwill with arrests and prison terms in 2015-2016. And then in less than a year the state struck again—and this time the victims were the Maoists. Ironically, both the social democrats and the Maoists nurtured hope in the party, with the former looking to the "liberal" wing of the party while the latter appealed to those party leaders who are still committed to the "socialist tradition," but both received the same treatment from the state.

It is a good thing to advocate for collective bargaining or workplace union organizing, but it is problematic to link these efforts with the idea of supporting this or that wing of the party leaders and to make political concessions to them. It is time to stop nurturing the illusion of party self-reform. Doing so will simply lead labor to play into the hands of the faction fight among top leaders, leaving labor with nothing except more repression and hopelessness. Instead of self-reform, the CCP is evolving into a "totalitarian" regime (a debatable term, surely) which now aims at brainwashing the population to the degree that not only are all potential dissidents repressed, but that everyone must think the same as Xi.

Only a united resistance from labor could stop this madness. Precisely how to achieve this is doubtless a big question and there is no easy answer available. The increasing repression also implies that Xi's regime is much more ruthless than its predecessors, hence existing legal channels for collective action are closing up as well. At this stage, however, we can at least preserve our forces as much as possible and not become involved in hopeless confrontation. The time for an offensive will come, but it is not now. Secondly, in the face of repression we should try to forge a united front among labor groups and support each other. This is possible through public debate: Despite repression, on-line discussion is always heated among activists in mainland China, since all labor currents run websites both inside and outside the country.

Maoists Against Social Democrats

It is sad to review the past twenty-year intellectual history of China. Both the liberals and the New Left treated each other as the main enemy while both sides pledged allegiance to the party-state so as to maintain links with the two main ruling cliques. When the Zhengzhou Maoists were repressed in 2004, certain liberals forgot about their commitment to freedom of speech and stayed silent, giving tacit support for the arrests. In 2008, the New Left and the Maoists applauded the conviction of Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. These are just the most famous cases of intolerance from both currents.

In recent years, such hostility between the two sides has receded a bit as both are increasingly

facing repression. The rise of social democrats in China, who are also mildly critical of the right-wing liberals, has laid a common ground for all labor currents to fight for basic civil and labor rights. However when the state repressed the NGO that supported Wang's campaign for basic labor rights in 2015, the Maoists did express solidarity with them. Minqi Li has recognized the need for basic labor rights and has added that they are far from enough (which is true), and that what is also needed is a class struggle to reestablish public ownership (which is desirable). As Minqi Li debates the future and notes that "when the time of a labor movement climax arrives" it will necessarily make class struggle sharpen to a point where class collaboration and even collective bargaining will be impossible, he challenges Wang by asking, "Which side will you be on when the time comes?"[6] But we should ask as well about the present, when the state is ruthlessly persecuting everyone.

From a left perspective, a socialist transformation in China is surely desirable. But a debate about program and class strategy, however necessary, should not be counterposed to a common struggle to win basic civil rights at present. Without these rights it is very difficult for spontaneous strikes to develop into organized struggles, let alone a "socialist transformation," especially when government's control is so strong that underground work is very difficult if not impossible in most situations. The inconvenient truth is that long before the arrival of "the labor movement climax" we may all be already crushed by the state.

In China, these two constitute the main labor currents. Now both are in a dire situation, and the world labor movement must come to their aid, learning from the bitter fruits of sectarianism, as in the failure of the German Communist Party and the Social Democrats to forge an alliance against the Nazis in the late 1920s. As China is quickly evolving into a totalitarian state, the greatest danger among labor activists is being sectarian. Although the German case is not entirely comparable, it is common sense that ideological differences between the two main labor currents should not become an obstacle to tactical alliance for civil and labor rights at present. Different currents will continue to disagree among themselves on many things, but right now we should recognize that there is also something in common, and then even if we march separately let us strike together.

There are indications this is occurring, with Chinese social democrats more willing to express solidarity with the Maoists. CLB, for instance, endorsed the solidarity statement—prepared by other Hong Kong labor groups—with the Jasic Maoists. These Hong Kong groups are slightly to the left of Han Dongfang, as they have less illusion of a self-reform of the CCP under Xi. Despite ideological differences with the Maoists, they also came out in support of the Jasic struggle, partly because they focus on practical work rather than theoretical debate.

The Revolutionary Marxists

Besides the two main currents as described above, there has existed since the turn of the century a tiny stream of Revolutionary Marxists (RM). The RM often turns to Trotsky, not Mao, as their chief theoretical reference point. As Minqi Li puts it, besides their own "Marxist-Leninist-Maoist" faction there is now a "Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist" faction. The RM cannot be compared in influence to the social democrats and the Maoists, who have strong connections to the institutions and the establishment and hence enjoy much more resources. The RM is at best composed of individuals and a few tiny groups with little resources and connections. On top of this the authorities see them as even more dangerous than the other two currents. Hence, they are very low-profile, if not entirely underground or hidden in NGOs and such organizations.

Some members of the RM have done good work, such as introducing European Marxist writings and working on labor rights. The more visible RM members are usually those who are active on the internet (and in private gatherings). Their debate with the Maoists on the character of the Chinese regime did pressure the latter to respond to this important question, and thus contributed to a

rethinking process among leftists. Probably they were also among the first set of leftists who started debating about *ronggong*, or students going to work in factories. Therefore even when the RM is so seemingly marginal and insignificant, in relation to leftist ideas it is still worth noting. Individual RM members, however, sometimes curiously echo a Maoist tendency to deny the progressive nature of winning civil liberties during the present stage. They criticize social democrats like Wang Jiangsong as "reformist" (which is true) and treat them as the main enemy (which is problematic).

To sum up, we need to get rid of the idea of self-reform of the ruling clique and rely on the awakening of the working masses instead. In order to accomplish the latter task, it is important that labor currents come to the understanding that a common struggle to win basic civil and labor rights is paramount for a labor future and that ideological disagreement does not hinder this struggle. In the end, instead of treating an "-ism" as dogma or even worse, a new religion, labor should treat it as their working hypothesis in the practical fight against a new totalitarian regime.

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Notes

1. *Wu Jingtang–benfu shenzhen pingshan! Weile gongrenjieji de juexing, weile Maozhuxi!* (Wu Jingtang—Rush to Shenzhen Pingshan! For the Sake of Working Class Awakening, for the Sake of Chairman Mao!).
2. *Jinggangshan jinhezai?* (accessed 10/21/18).
3. *China and the 21st Century Crisis*, Pluto Press, 2016, pp. 38 and 183.
4. *Weishen Yao Zhijing he Xuexi Lide Gongren* (Why We Need to Learn from Lide Workers and to Pay Respect to Them).
5. Hearing: China's Rise: The Strategic Impact of Its Economic and Military Growth.
6. *Dang Gongren Yundong Gaochao Lailinshi, 'Laogongjie' Hequhecong?* (When the Climax of the Workers Movement Arrives, Where Should Labor Go?).