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In the summer of 2018, a series of protests by some workers at Jasic, a publicly listed private firm specialising in the manufacture of welding machinery, made headlines all over the world. At a time when labour activism in China was at a low ebb due to increased repression, these workers mobilised to demand not only better working conditions, but also the right to establish a company union that actually represented their interests, thus challenging the top-down control of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. What differentiated this mobilisation from other protests that had advanced similar demands in the past—such as the Nanhai Honda strike of 2010—was the involvement of groups of Maoist students from some of China’s elite universities. Not only did these students play an important role in the underground organising that led to the protest, but also many of their comrades flocked to Shenzhen to publicly express solidarity with the workers being repressed by the machinery of the State. The consequences were disastrous for both the workers and the students, many of whom were subjected to intimidation, arrested, and forced to record confessions, in a wave of repression that rippled across university campuses in other cities, including Beijing. Activists in labour nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) who had barely managed to escape the previous wave and had nothing to do with the Jasic mobilisation were also swept up in the crackdown, with some ending up in detention for as long as fifteen months. This closed the circle on what began with the attempts at labour organising by a handful of students in the early 1920s: one century later, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) consummated this ultimate betrayal of its original ideals.

The Jasic Struggle

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On 22 July 2018, people passing the Yanziling Police Station in Shenzhen's crowded Pingshan district would have come across an unusual protest by workers. The participants did not mill about in the street, seeking safety in numbers. Nor did they draw on the familiar repertoire of more confrontational tactics developed over the previous two decades of industrial conflict in their country, such as carrying a banner, blocking a road, or threatening suicide. Instead, one by one, they came forward and delivered long, impassioned speeches in hoarse voices denouncing their oppressive working conditions, the unresponsiveness of the local trade union apparatus, and police violence in reaction to previous mobilisations.¹ Onlookers would have learnt that the site of the protest was no accident. The Yanziling station had only days before held several of the protesters and, surprisingly, even after having been released, these individuals had returned to the place of their detention to demonstrate.

Two weeks later, observers would have been yet more astonished. On the afternoon of 6 August, they would have seen not just the same workers making speeches in the same place (something the workers had done on several occasions by then), but also university students, retired state-owned enterprise (SOE) employees, and old Communist Party cadres from around the country, many of them wearing white T-shirts with black and white sketches of the workers from the previous protests and the words 'Solidarity Is Power' (团结就是力量) in red. Some held portraits of Chairman Mao. And there were banners now, too: 'The workers are innocent! Forming a union is not a crime!'² Again, demonstrators took turns addressing whoever stopped to listen, while their words, this time, touched on yet broader themes: worker-intellectual unity—'Today's students are tomorrow's workers' (今天的学生就是明天的工人)—and the need for everyone struggling under 'this structure' (这样的制度下) to unite.³ Sentiments like these had rarely been voiced in the thousands of labour conflicts that occurred during the three decades since the Tiananmen protests.

These remarkable scenes were part of what became known as the ‘Jasic campaign’ (佳士运动). This essay will explain how the campaign started, the unusual alliances that formed during its course, and the repressive response it drew from authorities, and it will reflect in a preliminary manner on what it might mean for the future.

How the Campaign Started

The Jasic campaign started in early 2017 with a dispute at the Shenzhen Jasic Technology Company Limited, a welding equipment manufacturer that employs around 1,000 people and is listed on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange. Employees there had run out of patience with, among other things, managerial physical and verbal abuse, the company’s constant redefinition of rest days (调休), extensive fines for various work rule infractions, and underpayment of social insurance premiums and housing allowances. In mid-2017, some workers brought their complaints to the local labour bureau and won a partial rollback of the most onerous policies. But people remained angry. The workers thus resumed their efforts in March and April 2018, focusing on the fines in particular. Again, the labour bureau put some pressure on Jasic and managers agreed to change, but the factory would not return money already deducted.⁴

Several Jasic employees then launched a unionisation drive, which followed procedures recommended to organisers by some officials they had approached in the local trade union of Pingshan district. Shenzhen had in the preceding years embarked on a notable effort to revitalise the district level of the union bureaucracy, so starting there made sense.⁵ However, the effort ran up against foot-dragging on the part of management, who agreed in principle to establish a union but would not supply the necessary documents. Instead, Jasic ended up holding elections for a Staff and Workers Representative Congress (职工代表大会)—a body that usually exists in parallel with enterprise-level unions. Managers furthermore excluded the union organisers from the election. The worker organisers responded with a letter in support of a real union signed by eighty-nine of their coworkers.⁶

From there, the conflict intensified. Leading activists were assigned by management to new positions in the company, attacked by thugs, and eventually roughly escorted out of the plant. When they returned to protest on 20 July, there was a clash with security, and the police intervened, detaining and severely beating several individuals. The detainees

were released the next day. However, on 21 and 22 July, workers gathered outside the Yanziling Police Station, where their colleagues had been detained, and reiterated their grievances. In addition, they called for the officers who had mistreated their comrades to be punished.

If at first there seemed to be some (limited) space for advancing the Jasic workers' aims within the country's established channels, now the State and its union closed ranks with the powerful local employer (the factory is just one of three run by the firm, which also has several research and design offices and has received various provincial and national prizes). The local trade union of Pingshan district not only refrained from exerting further pressure on the company, but also publicly lauded management's cooperation, while accusing the workers of illegal activities.⁷ On 27 July, the day after a dramatic night-time rally by the workers, police detained more than thirty protesters—an unusual crackdown even by the standards of the Xi Jinping era. When protesters gathered again to demand their coworkers' release, over a dozen more were taken into custody.⁸ The authorities now viewed the incident as a political challenge.

Workers would make little further progress with regard to their original aims. Although an enterprise-level union was eventually formed at Jasic, it was fully under management supervision. According to a filing by the Chinese Government in response to a freedom of association complaint to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the newly established union at Jasic focused on 'holiday benefits, the organization of cultural and sports activities, the improvement of welfare benefits, and adjustment of the wage system, as well as organized visits to workers living in difficult conditions.'⁹ It is unclear to the author what, if anything, happened with regard to the complaints about fines, abusive managers, and other thorny issues; however, the Jasic campaign would nonetheless continue to widen its ambit, becoming a national—and even international—phenomenon.

Support for the Jasic Workers

Almost from the beginning, the Jasic workers had significant external support. From the incident on 20 July onwards, letters backing the workers circulated among leftists on the Chinese internet. Social justice-minded university students like Shen Mengyu, a recent graduate of nearby Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou who had been active in labour organising since graduation, joined the protests early on and helped form the Jasic Workers Solidarity Group (佳士工人声援团). Others, like Peking

University student Yue Xin, who had already played an influential part in China's #MeToo movement and who wrote a powerful online letter drawing attention to the workers' cause, travelled to Shenzhen to help. On campuses around the country, Marxist reading groups held information events. These groups had been organising on behalf of migrants and campus employees and now saw an opportunity to make a bigger contribution. Dozens of students eventually moved into a flat in Huizhou and devoted themselves full-time to the cause. Even more than the workers, the students would become the campaign's public face.¹⁰

Students were not the only ones who joined the struggle, though. There were other outsiders who showed support, too, especially former SOE employees and Party cadres from the interior, where protests against public sector restructuring had raged in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see William Hurst's and Ching Kwan Lee's essays in the present volume). Many of these people—along with the students—were members of leftist networks connected through websites like *Utopia* (乌有之乡). Some belonged to a Maoist tendency that described itself as the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Left (MLML) and contrasted its politics with the more nationalist and pro-regime Maoists who had gained notoriety online and off as virulent critics of liberals and foreigners (some in the MLML would later express concerns about the students' naivety).¹¹ It has been reported that the worker-activists at Jasic themselves hailed from the same circles and joined the factory with the precise purpose of initiating a high-profile confrontation like the one that occurred.¹² Interestingly, the organisers did not engage local labour nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), which displayed sympathy but also wariness towards the struggle. Nonetheless, there was outreach beyond the confines of the radical left. At one point in the confrontation, for instance, organisers drew on the expertise of the liberal human rights activist Hu Jia, who had been imprisoned in the past for his HIV/AIDS and civil liberties advocacy.¹³

People mobilised further afield, as well. In Hong Kong, the independent Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and several civil society groups marched on the Central Government's Liaison Office in solidarity with the Jasic workers and their supporters.¹⁴ There were protests in Europe and the United States, too. The International Trade Union Confederation lodged a complaint about the case and other instances of labour rights violations in China with the ILO.¹⁵ When the government began to crack down on the students in earnest, Cornell University's School of

Industrial and Labor Relations severed its ties with Renmin University, where there were forced disappearances from campus.¹⁶ Left academics from Noam Chomsky to Slavoj Žižek committed to boycotting official Marxist conferences in China.¹⁷ From a relatively narrow factory dispute, the Jasic campaign became a major showdown. As such, it is not surprising that the government treated its participants with severity.

State Repression of the Campaign

State repression marked the Jasic campaign from the start. First, there were the arrests of protesting workers. Three of these people would eventually be formally charged with ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt order in a public place’: Li Zhan, Mi Jiuping, and Yu Juncong. A staffer and the legal representative of the NGO Shenzhen Dagongzhe Migrant Workers Centre were detained next, although by all reports the group played no meaningful role in the dispute; the staffer, Fu Changguo, would eventually face formal charges along with the three Jasic workers.¹⁸ Student Shen Mengyu disappeared on 11 August. Then, in an article on 24 August, *Xinhua News* blamed the unrest on local civil society groups colluding with hostile foreign forces, signalling a harder government line.¹⁹ On 26 August, riot police stormed the apartment in Huizhou shared by student supporters, detaining about forty individuals, including Yue Xin.²⁰

Things ramped up again in the autumn. In early November, authorities swept up student activists in Nanjing, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Guangzhou. A Peking University student leader was kidnapped.²¹ In December, two of the trade union officials who had provided advice to the workers at the outset of the dispute, along with a labour lawyer, were similarly detained.²² The same month, the head of Peking University’s Marxist society, who was on his way to celebrate Mao Zedong’s birthday in Shaoshan, Hunan, was snatched up, along with a classmate, who *did* make it to Hunan for the celebration.²³ Students at the School of Economics at Renmin University of China reported being forced to stay home under police monitoring.²⁴ Police summoned the remaining activists and showed them ‘confession’ videos of people who had been detained earlier, like Yue Xin.²⁵

Finally, Peking University administrators stepped in and reorganised the university’s Marxist society into a group comprising Communist Youth League members, who devoted their inaugural reading session to an anthology of neo-Confucian writings; each also received a copy of

President Xi Jinping's book on governance at the close of the session.²⁶ By early 2019, the extraordinary flowering of dissent had largely been mopped up.

The Meaning of Jasic

What, then, did it all mean? The implications of the Jasic campaign have already been the subject of some discussion. For example, in editorials and public comments, labour sociologist Pun Ngai has described the campaign as historic, highlighting in particular the workers' emphasis on union rights, which she believes marked an important shift away from the narrowly economic claims of most previous mobilisations and towards a more political conceptualisation of workers' role in society.²⁷ Leftist public intellectual Au Loong-Yu has countered that there had already been several other large-scale union-related disputes in the country before Jasic—for instance, the Uniden, Ole Wolff, and Yantian Container strikes, to mention just a few examples of the worker mobilisations that took place in the previous fifteen years—and cast doubt on whether the actions of a few dozen workers can be said to represent a change among workers in China more generally.²⁸ What Au has instead found special about Jasic is the campaign's break from the country's tired intellectual divisions: Chinese liberals versus the New Left and neo-Maoists. Sociologist Jenny Chan, meanwhile, has highlighted how the participation of students in the campaign is reminiscent of early twentieth-century organising.²⁹ Sociologist Yueran Zhang, while describing the campaign as 'an extraordinary feat' in terms of the scale of organising involved, has been critical of the vanguardist orientation of the Jasic activists, describing them as identifying more as 'revolutionary cadres' than 'labour organisers' and consequently poorly prepared to engage workers in a way that might build real power on the shopfloor.³⁰ Brian Hioe, editor of *New Bloom Magazine*, has wondered whether, barring some further expansion of activism in the future, the importance of Jasic may turn out to have been largely exaggerated.³¹

These assessments all offer important insights. But there are other lenses through which we can appreciate the campaign's uniqueness, while recognising its limits. First, if we approach it from a social movement perspective, Jasic represented a rare post-Tiananmen example of a fully fledged movement. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow define a 'social movement' as 'a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated

performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.³² Many observers have commented on the ephemeral nature of most Chinese labour disputes and their general lack of cross-worksite let alone cross-provincial organising.³³ In contrast, the Jasic campaign was, depending on how you count it, sustained for nearly one year and, as noted, drew in people from across the country, some of whom organised on their campuses or in their hometowns and others of whom relocated to Shenzhen to join the fight—all of whom were surprisingly open in their advocacy. Moreover, it developed a distinctive set of performances—the dramatic speeches in the streets described above—and even its own branding, as seen in the image of protesting workers and the stirring solidarity slogan that featured on participants' T-shirts (and on websites and Twitter accounts). The only other phenomena in China that have displayed this level of being a 'movement' have arguably been certain environmental campaigns, feminist organising, and rights lawyering.

Second and relatedly, if we approach the Jasic campaign from the perspective of China's governance strategy, we can appreciate the ties that Jasic built between communities that had intentionally been quite separated. China under the Communist Party has been described as a 'honeycomb' polity.³⁴ In the Mao era, as others in this volume have described, workers were frequently encouraged to join mass political campaigns. So, too, were peasants, intellectuals, and others. But aside from the most chaotic moments of the Cultural Revolution, in general, that mobilisation was firmly contained within the walls of the honeycomb.³⁵ Scholars have similarly described reform-era Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule as pitting different groups against each other: migrants against SOE workers, and professionals against both.³⁶ The great mass of people who filled Tiananmen Square in 1989, for instance, was undercut by divisions that were actively maintained by the authorities and participants alike. In particular, Tiananmen student leaders—intent on preserving the purity of their cause and worried about repression—excluded worker-activists until the last days of the movement (see Zhang's essay in the present volume).³⁷ There were *some* twenty-first-century precedents for the Jasic campaign: students went undercover to expose abuses in Coca-Cola and Foxconn facilities in 2009 and 2010 and backed sanitation workers in Guangzhou in 2014.³⁸ But none of these incidents came close to challenging the underlying and reinforced divisions of Chinese society in the way that Jasic did.

Finally, from the perspective of Chinese industrial relations, we can at once understand the campaign as a culmination of what came before it and as an aberration. We can reconcile Pun's and Au's analyses by stating that, while union-related demands were certainly a part of some important collective actions of the preceding two decades, they had very rarely—if ever—been made the centre of a campaign in the manner of Jasic. If most union bargaining had previously been initiated from above, in response to a bottom-up action already under way, now it was one of the calls that sparked the action in the first place.³⁹ However, in other regards, Jasic did not build on previous activism. In particular, contrary to the government's claims, labour NGOs did not play a meaningful role in the confrontation. Thus, the campaign did not draw on the arguably most developed (if still imperfect) worker organising structure existing up to that point. Nor did activists advance the strike as a weapon—the tactic that had featured in the biggest preceding confrontations. Jasic was fundamentally a *protest* movement. Moreover, whereas other disputes in roughly the same period—such as ones involving Wal-Mart employees, truckdrivers, and crane operators—had begun to extend worker-to-worker ties nationally, Jasic mostly came down to a single group of workers plus their assorted supporters.⁴⁰ These things should not be held against the organisers, of course, but they remind us that the campaign was unusual in ways that were both innovative and inspiring and that simply made it an outlier and, perhaps, a deadend.

Legacies of Struggle

Ultimately, the Jasic campaign may have inspired hopes that went beyond any campaign's ability to deliver at that moment in Chinese history. Other efforts on its scale would likely also have run up against the implacable hostility of the Xi administration. Indeed, in the year following the Jasic campaign, the crackdown widened, resulting in the arrests of many unrelated labour NGO leaders and labour journalists. Turmoil in Hong Kong's streets and then the spread of COVID-19 led to a further heightening of state control. Yet, each of the participants in the Jasic campaign still carries their own memories of the incident. So, too, do their coworkers and classmates who did not participate but observed things secondhand, as do other Chinese following online. These memories matter and can perhaps be drawn on at a more propitious moment.