

Reports disclose super-exploitation of Chinese technology workers

Pradeep Ramanayake
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A report released last month by the London-based *Financial Times* (FT) shed light on the conditions faced by workers in China's service sector due to long and stressful working hours. According to the report, technology companies are the worst exploiters.

Entitled "Overdoing it: the cost of China's long-hours culture," the report combined labour statistics with interviews gathered from workers employed in telecommunications, internet and IT companies.

Some 85 percent of white-collar employees in China have to work overtime, with more than 45 percent reporting overtime of more than 10 hours a week, according to a survey last year by job recruitment website Zhaopin.

Gina Wang, brand manager at Chinese internet company Tencent, told the FT "she starts work most days at 10am and generally finishes at 10pm, but sometimes is still working at midnight."

Another worker, Jing Li, an accountant at China's largest telecoms equipment maker, Huawei, earned \$US40,000 last year, equivalent to four times the average annual urban wage in China. But she said "you have to work as if you are four people [to get that wage]."

Both the workers complained of the mental and physical toll of their jobs. Wang said the burden of her work might be contributing to her stomach problems and periods of depression while Li said she too has suffered from depression.

The FT report cited some significant studies by medical journals. According to a study based on data from more than 600,000 individuals, published in 2015, the *Lancet*, a leading British-based journal found that people who work for more than 55 hours a week face an increased risk of stroke and coronary heart disease compared with those who work between 35 and 40

hours a week.

A survey in Shanghai last year of patients with cardiovascular disease found a significant incidence of arrhythmia—an irregular heartbeat that can be a prelude to more serious disease—in patients aged 21 to 30. Sun Baogui, executive vice-chairman of the Chinese Heart Failure Society, said this finding was consistent with their reported lifestyle of long working hours and getting little sleep.

China's labour laws state that workers should not work more than eight hours a day, or 44 hours a week, and that anything more than this should be categorised as overtime, which should not exceed three hours per day. Nevertheless, Chinese technology companies follow an "unspoken rule," called the "996 work schedule" or "work from 9 am to 9 pm every day for 6 days a week."

A BBC report last year, titled "Young Chinese are sick of working long hours," quoted a report by Zhang Xiaolin, a senior legal counsel at a Beijing-based law consulting company that further explained the illegal nature of this high level of exploitation on workers.

Xiaolin stated: "Theoretically, a 996 work schedule is against the law. Companies may apply for special permission to adopt a 996 schedule if their business warrants it. Pilots or train conductors, for example, can work longer shifts than the eight hours stipulated under Chinese law. But e-commerce businesses do not qualify."

It was not just the long hours that were illegal, Xiaolin said, "but also the pay—more than 40 percent of new companies we interviewed did not have a clear compensation scheme for overtime."

The workers who spoke to the FT said they expected a long-hours culture when they entered the industry. Although Chinese law requires overtime work to be

compensated at 1.5 times ordinary pay, they did not generally receive such payment because the work was classified as “voluntary,” meaning it fell outside the official definition of overtime.

The salaries paid to the workers do not match with their cost of living. For an example, Li Zhepeng, 25, who worked for an e-commerce site, told the BBC he received a salary of 3,500 yuan (\$560) a month for posting descriptions of toys and backpacks. That salary was less than half the monthly rental cost of a one-bedroom apartment outside the city centre, so he was sharing a small apartment with three flatmates.

It is not only in the technology sector that millions of Chinese workers face intensive exploitation. The ruthless environment of unpaid overtime is spreading to other fields as companies make their staff work longer hours in a bid to match this “success.”

The fact that this illegal regime has continued for years without being hindered by the authorities makes it clear that these inhumane levels of exploitation are backed by the Chinese government. It has long turned the country into a sweatshop in the interests of corporate profit.

Increasingly, struggles of the workers from different industries are erupting against the unbearable working and living conditions, and confronting massive repression by the Chinese ruling elite. Together with their fellow workers internationally, Chinese workers face the task of building an independent movement to fight against the severe exploitation and state repression on the basis of socialism.



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