Over 240,000 people back Chinese tech worker protest

Mike Ingram
22 May 2019

A protest by tech workers in China over inhumane working conditions has gained widespread support from software engineers and others internationally.

In March of this year a GitHub user with the name 996icu created a project named 996.icu. The project was named to protest the "996" work culture in Chinese tech companies. The name comes from the schedule of 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. The ICU was added to illustrate that workers who follow this schedule run the risk of ending up in an Intensive Care Unit.

GitHub is the largest open source code repository and development platform, which was bought by Microsoft last October for $7.5 billion. It has over 36 million users and hosts more than 96 million repositories from 2.1 million organizations worldwide. Unlike social media sites, GitHub is not blocked by China's firewall as it is the dominant platform for developers to collaborate and is a crucial part of Chinese tech companies' daily operations. The 996.icu project has been "starred" (liked) over 244,000 times and is watched by 4,790 users, making it one of the most popular repositories in GitHub history.

More than 500 users have contributed to a list of companies practicing 996 working hours. The list includes well-known companies such as Huawei, Alibaba, Baidu and Youzan.

A project started by Microsoft and GitHub workers, MSWorkers/support.996.ICU has been starred over 9,000 times. The site hosts a petition in Chinese and English that is signed by 486 tech workers. The petition notes, "Since going viral, Chinese domestic browsers, such as those by Tencent and Alibaba, have restricted access to the 996.ICU repository on their web browsers, warning users that the repository contains illegal or malicious content. We must entertain the possibility that Microsoft and GitHub will be pressured to remove the repository as well."

The workers state that they "stand in solidarity with tech workers in China" and know "this is a problem that crosses national borders."

The petition states: "These same issues permeate across full time and contingent jobs at Microsoft and the industry as a whole. Another reason we must take a stand in solidarity with Chinese workers is that history tells us that multinational companies will pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom as they outsource jobs and take advantage of weak labor standards in the pursuit of profit. We have to come together across national boundaries to ensure just working conditions for everyone around the globe," concluding, "We encourage Microsoft and GitHub to keep the 996.ICU GitHub repository **uncensored and available to everyone**."

Chinese labor law declares: "The State shall practice a working hour system wherein laborers shall work no more than eight hours a day no more than 44 hour a week on average."

Employers can "prolong work hours due to needs of production or business" but "in general, shall be no longer than one hour a day" or "no more than three hours a day" if due to "special reasons." Technology companies have openly flouted labor laws in China for years. In September 2016 the classified advertising website 58.com officially declared its adoption of the 996 working hour system. Jack Ma, the billionaire co-founder of Alibaba and China's richest man called 996 a "huge blessing" and said, "Those who can stick to a 996 schedule are those who have found their passion beyond monetary gains."

The 996 protest is part of a growing movement of the working class internationally which is fueled by the global crisis of capitalism. The Nikkei Asian Review reported in March on a wave of layoffs across the Chinese tech industry. Tencent Holdings, which runs the social media platform WeChat, announced March 19 that it would demote 10 percent of middle managers for "falling

short of expectations." More than 200 individuals are affected, according to reports.

Since February there have been reports that online game provider NetEase and JD.com, the second largest e-commerce platform, have also been cutting staff. US tech giant Oracle announced plans to lay off 500 senior staff at its China Development Center in Beijing prompting protests this month.

As stated by the Microsoft and GitHub workers, these practices are by no means limited to China. Tesla co-founder Elon Musk recently tweeted that "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week." A *Guardian* article from May 2017 gives a glimpse of what this means for workers at Musk's Freemont, California factory:

"Ambulances have been called more than 100 times since 2014 for workers experiencing fainting spells, dizziness, seizures, abnormal breathing and chest pains, according to incident reports obtained by the *Guardian*. Hundreds more were called for injuries and other medical issues," the article says.

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos wrote in a 1997 letter, "You can work long, hard, or smart, but at Amazon.com you can't choose two out of three." What this means for Amazon workers has been well documented by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the *International Amazon Workers Voice*.

Last year saw significant protests among US tech workers. At Google and Amazon workers challenged contracts to sell artificial intelligence and facial-recognition technology to the Pentagon and police. At Microsoft and Salesforce protests were issued against selling cloud computing services to immigration agencies who were separating families at the southern border. Now workers at Microsoft and GitHub are taking a stand in solidarity with workers in China fighting against the super exploitation of transnational corporations.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact