

Working class in China bears brunt of Beijing's COVID-19 response

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As the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 falls in China, the Beijing regime is holding up its belated response to the pandemic as a model to be emulated by the rest of the world. In doing so, the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is attempting to use nationalism to deflect attention away from the social disaster that its weeks-long denial of the virus caused for the Chinese working class, as well as from the police state measures that it has implemented.

China's National Health Commission reported on Monday there had only been 21 new cases of COVID-19 and 16 the previous day. Of the 21 new confirmed infections, 20 were detected in people arriving from overseas. As of Tuesday, 143 cases of COVID-19 in China came from abroad.

By comparison, Italy, which has become the new epicenter of the virus outbreak, reported 2,989 new cases on Tuesday alone, as well as 345 deaths. In total, there have been more than 191,000 cases and over 7,700 people have passed away. The majority of confirmed cases are now outside China.

The Chinese government has imposed strict travel bans in attempt to prevent new outbreaks. International travellers arriving at Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou will be medically evaluated and then escorted to a quarantine site where they will be placed under observation for two weeks. Those arriving from Italy, Spain, Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria face additional checks.

While testing and quarantines are a necessary measure to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, the harsh measures imposed by Beijing have added to a growing social crisis in China, which was in part exposed by the collapse on March 7 of a hotel used as a

quarantine site.

Residents under quarantine in cities like Wuhan have complained that they have been neglected by the government and limited access to basic food supplies and other necessities. Millions of workers have lost their jobs and no serious compensation has been provided. Large parts of the country are still under lockdown.

There is growing anger among the Chinese working class, which Beijing is attempting to contain with nationalist rhetoric. A commentary in the official state Xinhua news agency on Tuesday stated: "Under the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping, the whole nation has been mobilized in the fight against the virus. People from all walks of life made concerted efforts and fought in unity." The official rant declared: "With the full practice of collectivism and patriotism, the Chinese people have shown national unity and cohesion."

The reality is that the Chinese capitalist class, and the CCP regime that serves it, has imposed the full burden of the massive economic cost caused by the COVID-19 outbreak on workers and the rural poor.

Goldman Sachs on Tuesday stated it believes China's economy is likely to shrink by 9 percent in the first quarter—the largest decline since 1990. It further stated that China's annual gross domestic product will grow by 3 percent rather than its previous estimate of 5.5 percent. Even such estimates of growth are questionable, given industrial output fell by 13.5 percent in January and February, as factories in the major export regions were largely closed.

Chinese officials, however, claim that the economy is likely to return to normal in the second quarter. "Over 90 percent of large-scale industrial companies in regions outside of Hubei have resumed production, and

resumption rates for places including Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Shanghai are close to 100 percent,” said Meng Wei, spokeswoman for the National Development and Reform Commission.

However, China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said last week that small and medium-sized businesses have only resumed work at a 60 percent rate.

Workers face mass job losses and huge wage cuts. Nine million workers are predicted to lose their jobs in the coming year, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. The official urban unemployment rate is set to rise to 6.2 percent, the highest on record. An additional 18 to 30 million workers could see their wages slashed by as much as 50 percent.

Smaller businesses in China employ as many as 200 million people. Many of these are restaurants or bars that were forced to close. In many cases, they employ migrant workers who have been unable to return to work. Approximately 20 percent of people have been unable to return to their workplaces.

Migrant workers in general have been hard hit. When belated quarantine measures were taken to halt the spread of COVID-19 in late January, many migrant workers were visiting their hometowns for the Lunar New Year, often located far from their place of employment. Only those with a formal job were able to travel while others were unable to afford the costs of high-speed trains that remained open for the wealthy.

“There is nothing I can do except wait,” Zhang Yanwei told the *Financial Times* at the beginning of March. Zhang, a plumber, expected to find work outside his hometown of Zhumiao, in Shandong province, but has been unable to travel without a formal job contract.

In some cases, workers who were able to return to their job sites were forced into quarantine in their dormitories, sharing rooms with other workers, risking a wider infection while going unpaid. In the worst cases, workers were thrown from their accommodations and rendered homeless and unable to travel to their hometowns, forced to live on the streets.

Contrary to Beijing’s claims that the entire country has rallied together, the working class has been made to endure incredibly harsh conditions. The ability for China to contain the spread of COVID-19 was only the result of police state measures that imposed the full

burden of the health crisis on workers and their families. The Chinese capitalist class, embodied by President Xi Jinping, has paid basically nothing. Most of the Chinese rich have simply escaped to their luxury homes in suburbs of the major cities, or in other countries, and are riding out the crisis.

The Chinese experience is only a “model” to the extent that it serves to underscore the necessity for the working class internationally to take direct control over the COVID-19 response. Only the independent action of workers can guarantee that all measures are implemented with respect for basic democratic rights and the social right to a decent income, housing and essential services.



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