

# As COVID-19 resurges, Chinese workers hit by pay and job cuts

Jerry Zhang  
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The coronavirus pandemic is continuing to spread in China, and a recent report has revealed that, as elsewhere around the world, governments and employers are exploiting the crisis to slash wages and full-time jobs.

According to the National Health Commission, 118 new confirmed COVID-19 cases (symptomatic) and 91 asymptomatic infections were reported in China on January 18. As of midnight on January 19, China had 2,215 confirmed cases and 811 asymptomatic infections.

As well as being placed on the front line of the pandemic, Chinese workers are facing an offensive against their working conditions. On January 16, the School of Social Sciences of Tsinghua University released the “2020 Township Labor Market Survey Report.” The report stated that during the pandemic, 24.4 percent of workers have experienced a wage cut, with 6 percent of workers’ wages dropping sharply.

In addition, 31.7 percent of township workers started to take part-time jobs after the pandemic began. Support for workers’ food and accommodation in the workplace also dropped significantly.

Hebei, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces are still the hardest hit COVID-19 areas. The Hebei Provincial Health Commission issued a notice on January 17, upgrading a region in Xinle City, Shijiazhuang to a high-risk area. Another high-risk area in Shijiazhuang is Gaocheng District. Also on January 17, another 10 Shijiazhuang districts were upgraded to medium-risk, taking Hebei Province’s total of medium-risk areas to 48.

Also on January 17, a Jilin Province pandemic prevention and control press conference announced that a “super transmission” event had occurred in the province, causing 102 cases, after an asymptomatic infected sales person from Heilongjiang entered Jilin. According to reports, from January 6 to 11, he conducted four marketing activities aimed at the elderly.

A few days ago, the epidemic in Suihua City,

Heilongjiang Province spread to eight cities in three provinces within three days. According to the data previously notified by Heilongjiang Province, the province had 216 new infections inside seven days. An infected person reportedly attended a wedding for two consecutive days, resulting in an outbreak.

What is particularly worrying is that many infected people took trains or buses and entered crowded places such as stations, expanding the pandemic’s geographical scope.

With the rapid spread of infections, medical resources have begun to be strained, and weaknesses in the medical system have been exposed. In an interview with *Caijing* magazine, a doctor said rural areas and some small towns were far from vigilant, and management was relatively rigid, making it difficult to detect pandemics immediately.

A person in charge of a township health centre in Hunan Province said epidemic prevention work in “grassroots areas” such as townships and rural areas was quite difficult, with limited personnel and funds. Some hospitals have no relevant medical equipment. Protective clothing and masks are very expensive, and the qualifications and training levels of medical workers are problematic.

After the pandemic was contained in the second half of 2020, the Chinese government and media began to downplay its impact and vigorously promoted achievements in “recovering production.” Protection work was neglected to a certain extent.

With the annual Spring Festival due on February 12, returning migrant workers have put further pressure on the prevention and control of pandemics in rural and township areas.

China’s bureaucratic measures have also affected residents in infected areas. Local governments have resumed the methods they used during last year’s lockdown, such as setting up roadblocks to halt traffic,

severely affecting the transportation of medical supplies and everyday necessities. In recent days, news has spread of shortages and sharp price rises for vegetables, meat and other foods.

On January 17, a number of departments in Hebei Province jointly issued a notice requesting local governments to immediately stop this method of blocking traffic, but the problems have persisted. In order to prevent infections from appearing in their jurisdictions and affecting their own “political performance,” local bureaucrats have kept stopping vehicles and people from entering.

The rigidity of social management is also taking a toll, including by making it difficult for ordinary patients to seek medical treatment. In one reported instance, a parent of a premature baby asked for help on social media. The child was at risk of blindness and in urgent need of eye surgery in Beijing, but because their household registration was in Hebei, many hospitals refused treatment. The plea for help aroused popular attention, finally forcing a hospital in Beijing to treat the baby.

Since the Wuhan lockdown last year, similar things have happened in every city. While lockdowns in China have proved effective against the pandemic, the official state media ignores the demands and difficulties of ordinary people.

While the working class is bearing the brunt of the pandemic, the total wealth of the 400 richest people in China soared from \$US1.29 trillion to \$2.11 trillion last year—an increase overall of more than 60 percent—according to the *Forbes* 2020 Rich List.

This staggering inequality is set to worsen. On January 15, Chen Yulu, deputy governor of the People’s Bank of China, said China’s prices would continue to rise “modestly” in 2021. Rising prices will make the life of working class households more difficult.



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