

# Suicide attempt by food delivery worker in China exposes exploitative working conditions

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On January 11, a 47-year-old food delivery worker, Liu, attempted to commit suicide by setting himself on fire with gasoline on the curb side after he was denied the bulk of his wages from November last year. Nearby shop owners quickly saved him with fire extinguishers and sent him to the hospital.

Liu had burns over 80 percent of his body, and went through 20 operations that would cost more than 200,000 RMB (\$US28,570). Even if he survives the burns, he is likely to need assistance in many daily activities and thus have very limited employment choices in the future.

The tragic attempt by this food delivery worker to take his own life has not only revealed his desperate plight, but also exposed the broader exploitation of workers in China.

Liu was hired by a local service and distribution station in Taizhou, a city in the southeastern province of Jiangsu. The distribution station belongs to Fengniao, a company that hires delivery workers and serves Ele.me, one of the two largest food delivery platforms in China. The parent company of Ele.me is Alibaba, whose owner Jack Ma holds a wealth of \$65.6 billion and is the second richest person in China.

The wage disputes that eventually led to Liu's suicide attempt originated from an adjustment made to payments for food delivery workers at a number of distribution stations in Taizhou last November.

Previously, a delivery worker was paid 6 RMB or 86 US cents per order. Under the new plan, payment is based on the numbers of orders delivered on a monthly basis starting with a low figure: just 4.5 RMB per order once a worker has reached 600 orders, and 5.2 RMB after 800 orders. A worker has to reach 1,200 orders before being paid 6 RMB per order, and 1,400 orders to receive 6.2 RMB. A large number of workers never

reach 1,200 orders a month and so effectively receive a pay cut.

The new policy has caused widespread discontent among food delivery workers hired by these distribution stations. According to a news report by NetEase Inc., a leading IT company in China, just in November, five delivery workers resigned from one distribution station after it implemented the wage cut.

Liu was unhappy with the new policy as well, and was considering working for a different platform. At the beginning of December, he asked for a month's leave, claiming that he needed to return to his hometown for personal business. In fact, he went to work for another service station in the same city run by a different company, Meituan, the rival to Ele.me.

Later, when he collected his wages for November, Liu was expecting about 6,000 RMB, but only received around 1,000. The other 5,000 RMB, according to Liu, was deducted because the owner of the original station he worked for most likely has seen him working for the other company, rather than going back to his hometown, and was deemed to have resigned.

According to the same report from NetEase Inc., Liu has worked as a food delivery driver for three years, almost always working for 12 hours every day and delivering around 1200 orders a month. His family, including his wife who has a liver disease and two daughters, was completely reliant on his income.

Liu's co-workers said that he had had a car accident during work last year, and had no savings left after he recovered. Without the full amount of his wages from November, his family would starve. For 18 days after he received his reduced November wages, Liu had been demanding the deducted amount back. Finally in an act of desperation and hopelessness, he attempted to take his own life.

In an effort to deflect public attention from the harsh conditions imposed on its drivers, Ele.me has promised to pay for Liu's medical costs in the initial stage.

His is not the only case, however. On December 21, 2020, another food delivery worker of Ele.me in Beijing died from a sudden heart attack during work. He was only 43-years-old and, according to his wife, had no underlying health conditions. As the news of his death broke out, it was also revealed that every food delivery worker at Ele.me had been required to pay 3 RMB daily for insurance. However, only 1.06 RMB out of the 3 actually went towards insurance.

The company initially responded with 2,000 RMB (\$US285) in compensation to the family of the dead delivery worker. It claimed that under their contract delivery workers had no employment relations with the company, so even the 2,000 RMB was offered out of "humanitarian considerations," not legal obligations.

These comments triggered widespread anger among workers and young people on social media, who were outraged at the company's arrogance and contempt for workers' lives.

Facing widespread condemnation, Ele.me finally issued a new statement on January 8, promising compensation of 600,000 RMB for any delivery worker who die from a heart attack on the job. It is a pitiful amount for a life. The company made no concrete proposals to improve the gruelling working conditions and low wages of its food delivery workers.

How Ele.me treats its workers is not the exception, but the rule across the whole industry. A news journal in China, *Figures*, published a detailed exposure last summer of the extremely exploitative working conditions for delivery workers operating for Meituan, another leading food delivery service platform.

The company keeps reducing the time limit for each order. Its GPS system absurdly uses straight-line distances to destinations, not the actual roads workers need to follow. Sometimes, the GPS tells workers to ride in oncoming traffic lanes to save time, or directs them to walk through a brick wall. To avoid heavy fines for exceeding the time limits, the workers who ride on electric bikes are forced to speed, run red lights, and ride between cars. In Shanghai, there is the injury or death of a food delivery worker in a traffic accident every 2.5 days.

The workload and work intensity is unimaginable.

The manager of a local distribution station explained that 30 workers were forced to complete 1,000 orders within 3 hours. Even during a tsunami, workers were required to show up and take orders, or face a fine of double a day's absence.

Food delivery workers risk their lives every day to eke out a living, while the company owners are millionaires and billionaires. Wang Xing, the CEO of Meituan, has assets of 52.65 billion RMB and is among the 500 richest people in China. Zhang Xuhao, the founder of Ele.me also, has a wealth of 5.5 billion RMB and is among the richest 1,000. Jack Ma, China's second wealthiest individual, now owns Ele.me.

These astronomical sums have all been extracted through the super-exploitation and criminal endangerment of delivery workers.



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