

Food delivery worker in China detained for exposing working conditions

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On February 25, a food delivery worker and vlogger, Chen, was detained by the police in Beijing. Ten other food delivery workers who lived in Chen's neighbourhood were also taken away by the police, and two of them were released the next day. There has been no official information on the whereabouts or status of Chen and the eight other workers, either for their family members or to the public.

The arrests were an attempt by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to strangle any hints of social opposition during the National People's Congress that commenced on March 5, further revealing the fragility of this regime which sits on top of enormous social tensions.

Chen is a well-known vlogger among food delivery workers and has more than 100,000 followers across multiple social media platforms. His vlogs powerfully exposed the exploitative policies implemented by major delivery platforms like Meituan and Ele.me to extract greater profits. He spoke out bravely for delivery workers in distress over their treatment by company managements.

Last December, when a worker of Ele.me in Beijing succumbed to a sudden heart attack during work, Chen made two videos criticizing the company's cold-blooded attitude towards human life. Ele.me claimed that the dead worker did not have a direct labour contract with them and initially refused to pay any substantial compensation. Chen also exposed in these videos how food delivery platforms profiteer from their own workers: each worker is forced to pay for insurance, but only a third actually went towards insurance.

He forcefully said, "Food delivery platforms better not be passing the buck. For now, you [the company] can use the immense power of capital against us food

delivery workers, who are as unorganized as a plate of sand. It seems that you have taken a lot of advantages of us. Nevertheless, more and more people are waking up now." His videos were viewed more than 100,000 times on Weibo (a Twitter-type platform).

Just prior to his detention, Chen had produced a series of videos exposing how food delivery platforms tricked workers into finishing more orders. Before the Spring Festival, a national holiday which is usually the only chance for migrant workers to return home, a bonus event was presented for food delivery workers. The event promised several incentives if workers stayed in the big cities during the Spring Festival and finished a certain number of deliveries over four weeks. The bonus amounted to just 8,000 RMB (\$US1,145).

However, after the first two weeks, many workers found out that the company quietly raised the bar by a huge amount and even stopped counting the number of deliveries finished. A worker interviewed in Chen's video revealed that the system seemed to deliberately assign fewer orders to workers to make sure they could not reach the requirement for bonuses. Chen also explained how the companies have forced workers to compete with each other to further drive down the payment per order. These videos received over 8 million views across social media and triggered a lot of anger against this blatant act of exploitation.

Besides these staggering exposures, Chen has also documented many funny, touching, or heart-warming moments in food delivery workers' daily lives: the food they made, their aspirations, life tips and many more. Since August 2019, outside of vlog and social media platforms, Chen has organized more than a dozen chat groups for tens of thousands of workers in Beijing to connect and help each other out.

It is not the first time Chen has been detained. In

December 2019, he attempted to organize a work stoppage to protest against the lowering of the per-order payment, calling on delivery workers to boycott Meituan for the first three days and Ele.me for the next three days. Even though this campaign did not eventuate, Chen was detained for 26 days.

Any news or discussion about Chen's "disappearance" has been heavily censored on social media. Almost all posts have been deleted within hours or even minutes. Nevertheless, he has received widespread sympathy and support. Last week Chen's father and sister published a letter online, appealing for financial assistance to cover legal costs. Even though their letter was deleted just one hour after posting, they still received donations of 120,000 RMB (\$US17,145) in total within a day.

The detention of Chen signifies that the CCP regime cannot tolerate any voices of discontent from workers, nor attempts to connect with each other. It is terrified that exposures like Chen's would encourage widespread opposition among food delivery workers, who constantly suffer from prolonged working hours, the high risk of injury, exposure to severe weather, lack of legal protections, and attacks on wages.

Chen was taken away just before the commencement of the National People's Congress, in which top CCP bureaucrats expressed nervousness over the immense social tensions building up in China as a result of their rush for economic growth in a bid to reduce urban unemployment. The regime can provide no progressive solution to resolve the mounting social crisis, and resorts to police-state measures to silence any opposition.

On March 1, only a week after Chen went missing, more than a hundred food delivery workers went on strike and demonstrated at a shopping mall in Shenzhen, Guangdong. They were protesting against the lowering of their wages by calculating pay based on the distance travelled for each order.

For food delivery workers, or any sections of the working class, to win better working conditions and wages, their struggles have to be based on the fight for genuine socialism—the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International. There should be no illusions in the Stalinist CCP, which is responsible for the restoration of capitalism in China and its exploitation and oppression of workers.



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