

Chinese government imposes a “three-child” policy

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On May 31, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) politburo announced that birth restrictions would be further eased and each couple allowed to have three children.

This most recent modification of the decades-old population control policy still maintains a limit on childbirth. It is another bureaucratic and anti-democratic attempt to respond to declines in birth rates and the slowing growth of the Chinese capitalist economy.

The “three-child” announcement was not warmly welcomed, however, and it was especially unpopular among young people.

One of the most prevalent responses on social media was that the financial burden of having one child is heavy enough, let alone three. As is the case internationally, workers and young people in China are confronted with worsening living and working conditions, an ever-bleaker job market amid the pandemic, and limited access to social services, including public schools for those families migrating to large cities.

In cities where job opportunities are centered, rent itself could easily eat up half of the monthly salary of a young college graduate or more, while housing prices have been skyrocketing. For instance, the median second-hand housing price in Shenzhen, one of the major centers for foreign trade, manufacture and IT in southeast China, reached 54,110 renminbi (RMB) per square meter (\$US718 per square feet) last year, while the median monthly income there is just 5,199 RMB (\$US742).

That is, a small two-bedroom apartment could easily cost more than 3 million RMB, a figure greater than 40 years’ salary for someone on the median income.

Another prevalent concern, particularly among young

women, is that the three-child policy will further suppress their employment opportunities. Even before the hated one-child policy was dropped in 2011, it was not uncommon for women of child-bearing age to be asked during job interviews if they have children or plan to bear a child. Many companies consider paid maternity leave as an impediment to their accumulation of profits.

Now, if a woman can potentially have three children, which could amount to at least six or seven years on and off maternity leave during her late twenties and early thirties, she will be placed in an extremely disadvantaged position in an increasingly competitive job market.

The CCP regime’s birth regulation policies are not simply an attack on women, but on the democratic rights of all workers to decide how many children they want to have. The previous one-child policy was widely resented. Workers who broke the rule were forced to pay financially crippling fines (which amounted to nothing for many party bureaucrats, wealthy elites and urban upper middle-class households), went through sterilizations and abortions against their will, and lost their jobs.

The CCP has turned towards encouraging couples to have more children, not to right the wrongs of the past or to uphold the interests of workers. On the contrary, the government’s latest stance is motivated solely by the financial and political interests of the Chinese capitalist class.

The one-child policy was implemented in 1979 as China faced a rapidly expanding population. The specifics of this policy varied by province, but in general, each urban family was restricted to one child, while rural families were allowed two. Most ethnic minorities were exempted from the restrictions.

In 2011, if both parents were only children, they were allowed to have a second child. In 2013, this “two-child” policy was expanded so that only one parent needed to be a single child. Two years later, all couples were allowed a second child.

These shifts have been an attempt to address low birth rates, population aging and the fading away of the “demographic dividend” produced by a large segment of the population having been of working-age.

China’s rapid economic growth in the decades after capitalist restoration in 1978 partly relied on the fact that working-age people were a high proportion of the population, ensuring a ready supply for the labor market and less requirements for health care and pensions.

The two-child policy failed. According to a demographic study conducted last year by the Evergrande Research Institute, China will soon approach its population peak. During 2018, the number of births fell by 2 million, followed by a further decline of 580,000 in 2019. By 2030, the annual number of births is forecast to drop by another 3.65 million.

At the same time, the population is aging disproportionately. In 2019, 12.6 percent of people were 65 years old and above. This figure will reach 14 percent in 2022, 20 percent in 2033, and an extraordinary 35 percent in 2060.

The official Xinhua news agency said the new three-child policy could “maximize the role of population in stimulating economic and social growth.” The politburo itself declared that the change was essential in “realizing a rapid and high-quality economic growth, defending national security, and maintaining social stability.”

Low birth rates and an aging population, as recognized by the CCP bureaucrats, have serious economic and social implications. The same demographic study reported that the proportion of the population that is working-age had been in decline since 2010. It was estimated that by 2050, the relative size of this cohort would decrease by another 23 percent compared to 2019. The study warned that an aging population would increase consumption and reduce savings and investment, potentially impeding economic growth.

Economic growth had been slowing years before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the June quarter of 2019,

under the impact of the trade war measures implemented by the US, China’s growth rate hit its lowest point since 1992. This year, even though China recorded a sharp rebound from 2020’s pandemic impact, many concerns persist from the coronavirus crisis: unemployment, the bankruptcy of smaller enterprises, declines in the numbers of migrant workers in the cities, just to name a few.

The Beijing regime has long considered rapid economic growth as a central factor in maintaining social and political stability. Class tensions have intensified ever more in recent years, however, sharpened by staggering levels of inequality and increasingly oppressive forms of rule. Stimulating the birth rate is critical for the ruling elite to have a steady supply of cheap labor to boost output.

Underlying the low birth rate and young people’s unwillingness to have more children is a deep chasm between the tiny super-rich elite and masses of workers and young people struggling to get by. Opposition to this bureaucratic population policy cannot be separated from the fight against inequality, for decent employment and living conditions, and for democratic rights, that is, for genuine socialism.



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