

Workers die in extreme heat during China's summer

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Amid the hottest summer in over six decades in China, reports of workers' deaths and injuries due to heatstroke emerged around the country. The deaths, which were entirely preventable, are an indictment of the Chinese government and its failure to end the often onerous and dangerous conditions in which workers are forced to toil.

The three deaths examined below provoked widespread discussion and criticism on social media in China. However, the death toll and the impact of the extreme heat on the working class would have been far larger.

Construction worker in Xi'an

On July 5, Wang Jianlu, a 56-year-old construction worker from Xi'an, capital of the northwestern Shaanxi Province, fainted due to a heatstroke on his way home and was declared dead the next morning in the hospital. His body temperature reached 43°C (109°F) when he was taken to the hospital and the cause of his death was determined to be multiple organ failure due to extreme heat.

Before coming to Xi'an, Wang was a peasant in Ningqiang County on the southwestern corner of the province. More than a decade ago, Wang left home and went to work on construction sites in Xinjiang Province so that he could send more money to his children. He was only able to come home for a month or two around the New Year. His cousin took care of his children while he was away.

In 2015, Wang's son was admitted to a university but gave up the opportunity so as to start working and share the family's financial burden. Wang's son took part in the National College Entrance Examination again this year and was able to get into another university. To help pay for his son's college study, Wang left for Xi'an to find work about a month before his death.

Wang worked as a temporary worker on construction sites and was paid one to two thousand RMB (about \$US200) monthly for living expenses. His real wage, which was supposed to be more than this meager "stipend," would not be calculated until the end of the year. Often this wage was in arrears.

In Wang's case, by the time of his death, his 60,000 RMB wage from 2021 was still in arrears. He received a mere 260 RMB (\$US36) for his nine hours of work, just before he passed out from the heat.

Wang lived an austere life in Xi'an, renting a room in an urban village (a working class neighborhood, usually very crowded with limited infrastructure) for 260 RMB a month. When his family

collected his belongings after his death, there was virtually nothing in the room except for a fan, which he had only bought after repeated urging by his family.

During the previous month, Xi'an had experienced the hottest June ever since 1951. The day before the incident, the highest temperature reached 39°C (102.2°F) with a humidity around 50 percent. This hot, oppressive weather was exacerbated by the terrible working conditions at the construction site. Wang had worked in a basement from 6:30 a.m. removing wooden frames from just-molded concrete.

A fellow worker of Wang's commented that despite the slight rain before July 5, they hardly felt any drop in temperature in the basement. The concrete itself released a lot of heat into the room.

Initially, the construction company refused to pay any compensation to the family, insisting that they had held no responsibility as Wang fainted on his way home not at work. Even if Wang's family filed a case for labor arbitration, Wang had no legal employment relation because he was temporary and had signed no contract. The media mentioned that the company had contemptuously expressed disbelief that one could die of heat.

Wang's tragic death triggered widespread comment on social media and anger that workers were being forced to work in excessive heat. Only after public criticism widened did the construction company finally agree on July 17 to pay Wang's funeral expenses and compensation to his family. The amount remains unknown.

Freight handler in Zhejiang

On the night of July 14, Zhang Gongqian, a 34-year-old freight handler passed away in his rented home in Yuyao, a city in the southern province of Zhejiang.

Two days before his death, Zhang was feeling unwell and showing symptoms of heat stroke. He considered taking a few days off but was told by his supervisor that part of his salary would be deducted.

Zhang attempted to "pull through" despite his physical discomfort. At one point, Zhang even vomited the heatstroke medicine he just consumed. His work intensity remained

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Zhang worked as a freight handler for more than five years. From 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day, he and his coworkers would load and unload heavy items such as air conditioners or

refrigerators at a train station, making roughly 6,000 RMB (\$870) a month.

He lived a frugal life so as to send money to his wife and young daughter. His rented room was just 12 square-meters. Despite the extremely hot and humid weather in Yuyao, he only had two old fans in the room.

After his death, the logistics company refused to compensate his family because Zhang died neither during work hours nor at the workplace. His wife thought about applying for an autopsy to determine if the cause of death was heatstroke. However, she was informed that even if the cause of death could be determined, labor arbitration still would not recognize his death as work-related.

After weeks of negotiation and with the intervention of the local government, the company eventually agreed to pay 83,000 RMB (\$12,000) out of “humanitarian considerations.”

Dish-washing worker in Henan

Wei Qiaolian, 54, was a dish-washing worker in Kaifeng, Henan in central China. Not long after she left the factory on the afternoon of June 25, she fainted in the street. After struggling for days in a hospital ICU, Wei died from multiple organ failure induced by heatstroke.

A former worker at the same factory commented that the shop floor, with only one air conditioner, was very hot in the summer. Where Wei worked was particularly oppressive with the stench of rotten food. Workers did not have any time off on weekends or national holidays. One day not at work was a day without pay. There was no contract or insurance of any kind.

The company was highly exploitative. Workers had to hand in their cell phones when coming into work. They often had to work overtime but were only paid if they worked a full extra hour. Work hours are also uncertain. Workers were on call 24/7.

Wei thought about quitting in early May because she was overworked and exhausted. However, the management told her that it would take a month for her resignation to be approved. If she left sooner, the company would withhold her wages from the previous 18 days. She made just 3,000 RMB (\$435) a month.

On the day she collapsed, Wei called her husband during her lunchbreak and told him that she felt unwell and wanted to take the afternoon off. Her supervisor forced her to stay on the job till at least 3:30 p.m. Her workload was even greater than usual as the factory was understaffed. Wei felt very ill around 3 p.m. and was allowed to rest in an air-conditioned office. She left for home an hour later and passed out outside the company’s front door.

The company only paid for a fraction of her medical expense and this with multiple delays. Management then stopped payments altogether, claiming there was no point anymore in trying to save her. After Wei’s death, the company gave her family 230,000 RMB out of “humanitarian considerations,” but of that 140,000 RMB went on hospital bills.

The three tragedies have striking similarities: low wages, being forced to stay on the job despite feeling unwell, poor living conditions, no contract and the criminal disregard of the employer for the life and health of the workers. These deaths provide a glimpse into the appalling conditions facing broad layers of workers.

On July 15, a road worker in Hubei laying asphalt died of

heatstroke after working in high temperatures for multiple days. He was feeling sick the night before his death but was still assigned work.

In early July, several truck drivers in Henan, Zhejiang and Shaanxi provinces reportedly passed out due to the heat. Another truck driver in the southwestern city of Chongqing was found dead in his driving seat. On that day, the local temperature remained above 30°C (86°F) throughout the evening.

Tower crane workers have also suffered. Throughout the summer, multiple reports emerged in Shandong, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces of crane workers who had either passed out or were literally paralyzed in their seats.

The deaths were all avoidable. According to a regulation published by State Administration of Work Safety and All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) in 2012, no outdoor work should take place once the temperature is above 40°C. When the temperature is between 37° and 40°, there should be no outdoor work during the hottest three hours of the day and no-one should work more than six hours outside.

Many companies simply ignore the regulation and treat workers’ lives as expendable. Nor is the regulation ever seriously reinforced by the state apparatus. Despite the illness and deaths of many workers, no company management has been even fined or warned, let alone charged.

The drive for profit by companies operating with the complicity of the government and the state apparatus is now being compounded by the impact of global climate change.

The intensity of the heat wave during the summer of 2022 was at the highest level since China started systematic record-keeping in 1961. The number of consecutive days with a maximum over 32°C (89.6°F) also reached a record high.

The hardest hit region was the southwestern province of Sichuan and the adjacent city of Chongqing. Areas of Chongqing suffered under temperatures over 40°C for more than a week. The electric grid came under immense pressure as it depends upon usually abundant hydroelectric power. As rivers dried out in the heat, there was a power crunch when local residents especially needed air conditioning.

What happened this summer was not simply an issue for Chinese workers. Deaths from heat, wildfires, and threats to energy and food supplies were also prevalent in during multiple heat waves in Europe while the ruling classes remained indifferent to the impact of the heat on the broad layers of working people. Only a unified movement of the working class in China and internationally can put an end to the capitalist system that is the source of such disasters.



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