

A glimpse into what Chinese workers think about COVID restrictions

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Last weekend, protests erupted across major cities in China. These relatively small protests, largely drawn from middle class layers, were dominated by demands for an end to the official Zero-COVID policy and the abolition of mass testing, quarantining and lockdowns. Their slogan, “We want freedom,” reflected their hostility to necessary public health measures that infringe on their lifestyle and, in some cases, their business interests. The ending of Zero-COVID, which the Chinese government is now implementing, will only result in a social disaster—mass infections, deaths in the millions and many more cases of Long COVID.

The voice of the working class rarely has a major presence on Chinese social media and especially in the online discussions about the Zero-COVID policy. Two posts from workers in different parts of China paint a very different picture from the blanket coverage in the US and international media falsely painting last weekend’s protests as the voice of the people. Despite the hardships entailed, workers are very conscious of the dangers of infection and are supportive of necessary measures to prevent it.

Food delivery workers in Beijing

A food delivery worker under Meituan, one of the two largest food delivery platforms in China, made a post on social media about two weeks ago.

The residential compound in which he had been living was put under lockdown on the morning of November 20 and no one was allowed to enter or exit. A number of food delivery workers decided to stop living there and left the compound before the lockdown was put in place. They were worried about losing their only source of income if they stayed there, which is what happened last time when the compound was put under lockdown for a week.

Along with 15 other delivery workers, they had been homeless ever since. As the worker described in his post, “Some of us have been living at food delivery stations and some at cheap hotels, but most of us have been sleeping on hallways of office buildings or entrance ways to restaurants.” Temperatures in Beijing in late November reached below the freezing point in the evenings. Most of

these “lodging” places had no heating.

However, even these options were becoming unavailable. The worker continued, “As restaurants in Beijing moved to stop dine-in services, they would not let people [sleep] there anymore. As most people started working remotely, office buildings were harder to get into as well.” Most working class neighborhoods where cheap, short subleases could be found had been under lockdown as well, and hotels were just unaffordable.

The worker made this post only to plead for a place to sleep at night at an affordable price. And his plight was shared by many food delivery workers who did not want to lose their income because of lockdowns and chose to be homeless.

An interview with another group of food delivery workers, entitled “Food delivery workers attempting to get some sleep on cold nights under COVID,” described workers camping out in office buildings and sleeping on the floor near a bathroom because it had the most residual heat. If the weather got colder, they switched from beer to liquor to warm up. Sometimes a couple of workers huddled under a single blanket. Despite having a “roof” over their head, they constantly ran the risk of losing their belongings. The interview concluded, “during that cold night of -10, what accompanied them were stomach medicine, alcohol and snores from fellow delivery workers.”

Despite the extremely difficult conditions imposed on them by lockdown measures, the sentiments among workers were very different from those of the middle class layers demanding “freedom.” In the social media post, the delivery worker asking for help stated, “We have been homeless for days, but we still get a PCR test every day and follow all COVID-related measures. We left the residential compound before it was put under lockdown only because we don’t want to lose our only source of income.”

Coal miners in Yangquan, Shanxi

On November 28, a coal miner from Yangquan, a city in the coal-rich Shanxi Province in northern China, made a post on Weibo that started with “HELP!!!!” The miner worked at

Yangquan No.5 Coal Mine under Shanxi LuAn Group, one of the seven major coal mining companies in the province. The city of Yangquan also produces the highest quantity of anthracite in the country.

Since November 18, as the number of infections in Yangquan had been on the rise, a few thousand workers were required to stay at dormitories at the mine so that they would not run the risk of being quarantined at home and could keep production going.

No proper quarantine measures were in place at the mine to separate workers who tested positive. Sometimes a worker who tested positive would be handed a hazmat suit but would not be transferred out of the dorm. More than a dozen workers were crammed into a single dorm room with hardly any furniture or appliances outside of beds and a water fountain. Living space was so limited that some workers had to sleep on the floor of the shower. This only led to a further transmission of the virus among miners, causing many to come down with a fever.

Living conditions were terrible. There was a shortage of food. The miner who made the post reported that “the food they were able to have for a whole day was even less than what they usually had for a single meal.” He also posted a boxed meal they were provided, consisting only of rice, shredded potato, shredded carrots and “two or three shreds of meat.” This meal was brought to them around 6 p.m. and it was their lunch. Workers who were ill were not taken care of, as medicine was in short supply. Some workers with a high fever had only insta-ramen to eat. Despite all the harsh conditions, workers were kept on the job.

The worker commented in his post, “in order to meet the coal demand around the country, workers conduct high-risk work in the mine on a daily basis. But when workers are in need of warmth and security the most, where would they get warmth and support from?”

“Yangquan is a small city most people probably have never heard of, but it has the largest anthracite production in the country, sending warmth to many places across the country. Please do not just remember us when you feel cold. When we confront a harsh winter, we need others to put a warm coat around us as well.”

After this post spread on social media, the company finally transferred workers who tested positive to local hospitals or the nearby Fangcang hospital and started to provide more supplies to workers remaining at the mine.

What happened at this coal mine was similar to the situation facing workers at the Foxconn factory in Zhengzhou, the largest iPhone factory in the world. Foxconn workers were put under similar “closed-loop” management without an effective separation of those who contracted COVID. This led to a mass exodus in October and a protest

by thousands of mainly newly-hired workers in mid-November over non-payment of bonuses, poor food and being forced to work and sleep alongside workers who had tested positive. The sole concern of management, as at the coal mine, was production and profits.

Many workers have faced great difficulties as a result of the Zero-COVID policy. For temporary workers, who are mainly rural migrants, a day in quarantine means a day without pay. And those working on assembly lines are forced to stay on the job often without basic life and medical supplies.

However, food delivery workers, coal miners, workers on the assembly lines of Foxconn and many more understand that these COVID restrictions are necessary to prevent mass infections and deaths. The social media posts by workers are not calling for “freedom” from Zero-COVID, but for housing, proper food and measures to stop the spread of infections.

The hardships are not the result of the Zero-COVID policy itself. Rather, what is highlighted is the need for workers to be provided proper living and financial assistance from the government and employers. Workers should not have to choose between putting meals on the table and running the risk of being infected.

The Chinese government’s Zero-COVID policy over the past two years has demonstrated that elimination of the virus is possible, but only if implemented internationally. Now, confronted with enormous pressures internationally and from sections of business and the middle class at home, the regime is rapidly dispensing with the very measures that have proven effective in suppressing the virus.

As infections and deaths soar, it will inevitably be the working class that is hit the hardest. Employers at Foxconn and coal mines as well as countless other workplaces will take the easing of COVID restrictions as the go-ahead to end even the limited measures now in place to prevent infections.



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