

A steelworker in China writes about his working conditions

A Chinese steelworker
16 August 2023

The following is a letter sent to the World Socialist Web Site by a young steel worker outlining the shocking lack of basic safety conditions in his factory and asking that it be published.

When I was interviewed for this job, a manager gave me and other prospective workers a tour around the factory. Then, she gave us 10 minutes to read the safety guidelines. This was the only safety training we received. She told us our base salary was only 3,000 RMB (\$US412) a month, and any bonus would depend on the output of our plant.

Our contract was a piece of blank paper. The factory then wrote in their terms after we had already signed the paper. We are unable to see even a single clause of our contract.

On our second day, the factory asked new workers to watch how experienced workers operate and to assist them. Most jobs are extremely dangerous, and safety measures hardly exist.

While alloy steel rods heated to thousands of degrees rolled on their track, we need to perforate the rods and push them onto another track. A senior worker told me, there were times when hot steel rods fell from the track and crushed workers. However, the factory only symbolically added a few small fences along the track, which are hardly of any use. Workers still have to work by the tracks.

Discipline at the factory is extremely harsh. If a worker makes a mistake by accident, two to three days of wages are deducted. If a worker causes some damage to the factory, then the worker needs to pay extra. On paper, we are supposed to work eight hours a day. In reality, we are required to start work half an hour early. If the quota of the day is not met, we are compelled to work overtime. If you include the time taken to commute and to change into work clothing, we spend

more than 10 hours at work every day.

My mentor was young but had already worked at this factory for years. He had a big scar on his right leg after being burned by a hot steel rod.

Before we start our work every day, we need to check if all equipment and instruments are functioning properly. To do this, we have to climb to the top of a furnace burning at a temperature of 1,300°C (2372°F) and enter the hole in the furnace where the temperature exceeds 55°C (131°F) to make sure the instruments there work.

On top of all this, I also have to open pipes filled with fluoride, a highly corrosive and toxic chemical, to check if enough fluoride is in there. The factory uses fluoride to make sure it meets environmental standards and to avoid fines. These pipes are kept open all the time because there are no properly sized caps. One can smell this toxic chemical meters away. I can not breathe near it and have to hold my breath whenever I check it.

No safety measures are taken for these daily checkups. All we have is a pair of thermal gloves and a helmet.

One job in the factory is to manage the conveyor belts and send billets of over 200 kilograms into the furnace. The conveyor belts are old, and the chains often fall off. Whenever the conveyor belts gets stuck, workers have to go to great lengths to pry these 200 kilogram billets loose to get the conveyor running again.

There are no lunch breaks, but luckily workers care for each other. Workers take turns to go get food so that we do not starve at work.

The factory is very humid and hot, probably over 40°C (104°F). Huge industrial grade fans are not able to blow away all that heat. The factory only provided some drinking water at the beginning of work. If you get thirsty in the middle of work, you have to pay for it.

We have to drink more than three liters of water every day to prevent heat stroke.

Workers are very willing to help each other in their free time, but everyone needs time to rest as well. I've asked other workers about their thoughts on the working conditions. But they just said you have to get used to it. Workers' interest in politics is not low at all.

When I discuss political issues with them, they are very interested in history. Unfortunately, I cannot have more in-depth discussion with them. They are reluctant to express their own views. Maybe because we have not bonded enough.

The factory is very good at using subtle maneuvers to break workers' unity. For example, the management does not allow too many workers to get together and chat. They use fines and bonuses to divide and conquer. They deliberately give conflicting work arrangements to set workers against each other. While all this happen, the management stays in air-conditioned rooms.

Working under these dangerous conditions, almost every worker has a scar somewhere on their body. The factory cares nothing about so-called safe production. There are accidents every month, and the factory responds by imposing fines on workers.

These conditions are not particular to Chinese factories. Factories in Vietnam, India and Malaysia have similar conditions too. Workers around the world all endure inhuman treatment. This cannot simply be attributed to the crimes of this or that backward capitalist state. It is the global capitalist system that gives rise to these terrible conditions, and every imperialist and capitalist country is a link in the system. Only the proletariat revolution on the world scale can free the working class and the toiling mass from such oppression.



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