

In China, Tech-Worker Deaths Spark Online Backlash

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-china-tech-worker-deaths-spark-online-backlash-11610888403>

Jan 17, 2021

By Sha Hua

HONG KONG--The delivery man doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire. Engulfed in flames, he protested for what he said were unpaid fees from a business tied to Chinese technology giant Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.

"I want my blood- and sweat-money back," said the man, Liu Jin, covered in ash, as police officers tried to rush him to the hospital on Monday, a widely shared video posted on social media showed.

The 48-year-old Mr. Liu, who survived but suffered severe burns, is one of the millions of workers in China's tech sector whose plight has ignited online denunciations of the country's internet giants by internet users and state media. The outcry shines a spotlight on the grueling working conditions and hard-edge labor practices that many blue- and white-collar workers face as the internet companies they work for battle over users.

Mr. Liu delivered meals through a subcontractor of Alibaba's Ele.me food-delivery service in the eastern Chinese city of Taizhou, according to the local government. Ele.me said it has paid Mr. Liu's medical expenses and is continuing to assist him and his family. It also said that Ele.me prohibits agencies it works with from defaulting on paying delivery riders and that it is investigating the case.

In recent weeks, Pinduoduo Inc., a fast-growing e-commerce company that now rivals Alibaba by some measures, has also faced criticism after the deaths of two workers in their 20s: One collapsed on her way home from work at 1:30 a.m. and the other jumped from a high-rise. Pinduoduo confirmed the incidents and expressed condolences to the workers' families.

Posts about these incidents went viral on Chinese social media Weibo, drawing hundreds of millions of views, with many users criticizing the long working hours and calling for workers to be treated more humanely.

Another delivery man for Alibaba's Ele.me broke down and died on the job in December, according to state broadcaster Chinese Central Television. Ele.me, noting that the driver worked with a subcontractor, initially offered his family what it called "compassionate compensation" equivalent to \$300. After an online uproar, Ele.me said on Weibo it would increase the payout to \$92,000. The company didn't provide further comment.

Rising concerns and anger directed at China's increasingly powerful tech companies echo shifts in sentiment in the U.S. and Europe. As in the West, the reversal comes as authorities scrutinize the business practices of tech giants and take action to rein in their influence.

In recent months, Chinese authorities have launched an antimonopoly probe into Alibaba's business practices, shelved the initial public offering of its financial affiliate Ant Group Co. and summoned executives at Alibaba, Pinduoduo and four other tech giants to discuss their business practices.

Chinese technology companies have benefited from a sharp increase in demand for e-commerce and food delivery during the pandemic. In the first 11 months of 2020, online retail accounted for 30% of overall sales, up from 25.8% a year earlier, data from China's National Bureau of Statistics showed.

That surge in demand has lifted tech shares and the fortunes of entrepreneurs like Alibaba founder Jack Ma, who topped the list of China's wealthiest people before the latest wave of regulatory action drove down Alibaba shares. The share price of five-year-old Pinduoduo quadrupled last year, turning founder Colin Huang into China's second-richest man, according to Bloomberg's Billionaire Index.

The pandemic has added to heavy workloads for rank-and-file workers, from university-graduate programmers to less-educated delivery workers. China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based workers' rights group, says pay-per-order for couriers has fallen in recent years.

Algorithms on delivery apps pit couriers against one another, penalizing slower workers and those who receive anything less than a five-star customer review, adding an extra layer of psychological pressure, says Jenny Chan, an assistant professor of sociology at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

"The recent spate of deaths reveal the pent-up frustration and despair that have accumulated over time," says Ms. Chan, who studies the working conditions of China's delivery workers.

Workers in China, prevented from organizing by China's ban on independent labor unions, at times resort to drastic action to draw attention to their plight, she added.

Online posts showed that the latest incidents reminded many people of the series of suicides a decade ago by workers at Chinese factories where Foxconn Technology Group assembled gadgets including Apple Inc.'s iPhones. The suicides similarly highlighted the drudgery of high-tech work in China--back then building electronics, now working in the gig economy or e-commerce.

Dissatisfaction with Chinese internet companies' "996" culture--working 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week-- has been brewing for years. Labor law stipulates that working day shouldn't exceed eight hours and the working week 40 hours, though it is rarely enforced, notes Ms. Chan.

Many university graduates are willing to work the long hours in exchange for prestige and relatively high salaries, but a growing number say the pressure has become harder to bear.

This week, a video posted by a former Pinduoduo employee on Weibo decrying what he described as grueling working hours, rotten canteen meals and a shortage of toilets at company offices went viral on China's internet, racking up nearly 60 million views.

A spokesman for Pinduoduo said it fired the worker after finding that he had left "extreme statements with significant malicious intent" on an online forum. The employee, who according to the state-run Xinhua News Agency is a web engineer surnamed Wang, declined to comment, citing labor arbitration with Pinduoduo.

At the company's Shanghai headquarters, employees are discouraged from socializing and working hours as well as breaks are monitored by surveillance cameras, according to current and former employees of the five-year-old company. They said weak cellular data signals inside the office mean employees must use the company's network for internet connectivity, which they believe allows the firm to track their smartphone internet use.

One Pinduoduo employee's work schedule showed no days off, and office hours that regularly stretched past midnight and occasionally until 6 a.m., according to a digital record reviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*.

Pinduoduo didn't comment on specific workplace conditions, but said in a statement that it had set up an internal channel and a dedicated team to counsel employees after the latest worker deaths.

Ms. Chan, the sociologist, said public debate over tech companies' labor practices have helped fuel popular outcry, which in turn engenders support for tougher government regulation of the industry.

In a commentary posted on Weibo last week, state broadcaster CCTV called on tech companies to strengthen worker protections.

At Pinduoduo, workers say they are pessimistic that anything will change soon. "These issues have been discussed for such a long time already," said one. "Everyone's already resigned and quite numb to it."

Raffaele Huang and Lekai Liu contributed to this article.

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中国科技公司一连串员工死亡事件引发网络声讨

近期在中国互联网公司饿了么和拼多多接连发生的员工死亡事件引发了网民对科技巨头严苛的工作条件和繁重工作量的不满与声讨。

<https://cn.wsj.com/articles/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%A7%91%E6%8A%80%E5%85%AC%E5%8F%B8%E4%B8%80%E8%BF%9E%E4%B8%B2%E5%91%98%E5%B7%A5%E6%AD%BB%E4%BA%A1%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6%E5%BC%95%E5%8F%91%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E5%A3%B0%E8%AE%A8-11610944216?tesla=y>

阿里巴巴旗下的饿了么表示，该公司严禁合作机构以任何理由拖欠骑手配送费用。

华沙

上周一，中国网上订餐平台饿了么(Ele.me)平台骑手刘进将自己身上淋上汽油，点火自焚。据他称，这样做是为了讨薪。饿了么是中国科技巨头阿里巴巴集团控股有限公司(Alibaba Group Holding Limited, 9988.HK, BABA)旗下公司。

根据一段在社交媒体上被大量分享的视频，当时警察试图将全身大面积烧伤的刘进赶紧送往医院，刘进说想要回自己的血汗钱。

今年 48 岁的刘进虽然活了下来，但严重烧伤。他是中国科技行业数以百万计从业者中的一员，他的困境引发了网民和官方媒体对中国互联网巨头的网上声讨。这场声讨聚焦互联网公司争夺用户之际，许多蓝领和白领从业者面临的严苛工作条件和繁重工作量。

据当地政府提供的信息，刘进在中国东部城市泰州工作，通过饿了么的一个承包商配送外卖。饿了么表示，已经支付了刘进的医疗费用，正继续帮助他和他的家人。该公司还称，他们严禁合作机构以任何理由拖欠骑手配送费用，已对此事启动调查。

最近几周，中国快速发展的电商平台拼多多(Pinduoduo, PDD)两名员工死亡的消息也引发了批评；目前拼多多在某些方面已经可以比肩阿里巴巴。这两名员工都只有 20 多岁，其中一人是凌晨 1 点半下班回家的路上倒下的，另一人则是跳楼身亡。拼多多证实了这两起事件，并向相关员工家属表达了哀悼。

关于这些事件的帖子在中国的微博上广泛传播，吸引了数亿的浏览量，许多微博用户都批评工作时间过长，并呼吁给予员工更多的人性化待遇。

据官方媒体中国中央电视台报道，2020 年 12 月，阿里巴巴旗下外卖平台饿了么(Ele.me)的另一名送餐骑手在工作途中倒下猝死。饿了么指出，该送餐员是通过蜂鸟众包接的工作，出于人道主义一开始向该骑手的家人提供了相当于人民币 2,000 元的赔偿。该事件在网上引起一片哗然，之后饿了么在微博上发帖表示，将把赔偿金提高到人民币 60 万元。饿了么没有就此发表进一步的评论。

中国日益强大的科技公司引发的担忧和愤怒不断加剧，这与美国和欧洲的情况遥相呼应。正如西方国家一样，随着政府当局对科技巨头的商业行为进行审查，并采取行动控制他们的影响力，公众看法发生逆转。

最近几个月，中国当局已对阿里巴巴的商业行为展开了反垄断调查，叫停了阿里巴巴金融关联公司蚂蚁集团(Ant Group Co.)的首次公开募股(IPO)，并就商业行为问题约谈了阿里巴巴、拼多多和其他四家科技巨头的高管。

新冠疫情期间电商和餐饮外卖需求的急剧增长已令中国的科技公司大为受益。中国国家统计局的数据显示，在 2020 年前 11 个月，网络零售额占到了整体销售额的 30%，高于 2019 年同期的 25.8%。

这种需求的激增已提振了科技股，也令诸如阿里巴巴创始人马云等企业家的财富大增，在最新一波监管行动导致阿里巴巴的股价下跌之前，马云是中国富豪榜上的首富。根据彭博(Bloomberg)编制的亿万富翁指数(Billionaire Index)，成立五年的拼多多的股价在 2020 年上涨了三倍，令创始人黄峥(Colin Huang)成为中国第二大富豪。

但新冠疫情却给普通员工增添了沉重的工作量，从有大学文凭的程序员到受教育程度较低的送餐快递员，都是如此。总部设在香港的员工权益组织中国劳工通讯(China Labour Bulletin)表示，近年来快递员按单计价的报酬已经下降。

香港理工大学(Hong Kong Polytechnic University)社会学助理教授陈慧玲(Jenny Chan)表示，外卖应用的算法使外卖员相互竞争，送餐慢和得不到顾客五星好评的外卖员会受到惩罚，这又增加了一层心理压力。

研究中国外卖员工作条件的陈慧玲称，最近一连串死亡事件揭示了长期积累的沮丧和绝望。

她还表示，由于中国禁止成立独立的工会，中国的劳动者无法组织起来，在这样的情况下，他们有时会采取激烈行动，让人关注他们的困境。

从网上的帖子来看，最近这些事件让很多人回想起 10 年前苹果公司(Apple Inc., AAPL)代工商富士康科技集团(Foxconn Technology Group)旗下中国工厂的一系列工人自杀事件。这些自杀事件也凸显出中国高科技企业工作条件的艰辛，当时是制造电子产品，现在则是从事零工经济或电子商务。

人们对中国互联网公司“996”文化的不满已经酝酿多年。“996”指每周工作六天，每天从早上 9 点

上到晚上9点。陈慧玲指出，《劳动法》规定，工作日每天工作时间不应超过八小时，每周不应超过40小时，但很少强制执行。

许多大学毕业生愿意长时间工作，以换取升职和相对较高的薪水，但越来越多的人表示，这种压力已经变得越来越难以承受。

上周，一名拼多多前员工在微博上发布了一段视频，吐槽工作时间过长、工作餐经常出现坏掉的菜品、公司办公室厕所坑位不足等问题。该视频在中国互联网上热传，浏览量近6,000万。

拼多多一名发言人表示，发现这名员工在一个在线论坛上发表了“带有严重恶意的极端言论”后，公司解雇了他。据官方媒体新华社报道，这名员工姓王，是一名网络工程师。他以与拼多多进行劳动仲裁为由不予置评。

据这家成立五年的公司的现任和前任员工表示，在公司的上海总部，不鼓励员工社交，工作时间和工间休息时间都被监控摄像头监控。他们说，办公室内的手机信号很弱，这意味着员工必须使用公司的网络上网，他们认为这让公司可以追踪他们的智能手机上网情况。

拼多多一名员工的工作安排显示其没有休息日，办公时间经常持续至午夜后，偶尔会持续到早上六点。

拼多多没有对具体的工作条件置评，但在一份声明中称，在最近的员工死亡事件发生后，公司已开通内部渠道及安排专门团队为员工提供咨询服务。

陈慧玲表示，围绕科技公司用工行为的公开辩论，在一定程度上助推了公众的不满情绪，进而又促使人们支持政府加强对该行业的监管。

官方媒体中央电视台上周在微博上发表评论，呼吁科技公司加强劳动保障。

拼多多的员工表示，他们不认为情况会很快发生变化。一位员工称，这个话题说到现在这么久了，大家也都默许了，或者说麻木了。■