

Couriers being driven to despair



Workers sort parcels at a warehouse in Tianjin, North China.[Photo/China Daily]

Despite making a massive contribution to China's economy, delivery workers still endure long hours, low wages and poor job security. Hou Liqiang reports.

Wrapped warmly in leather leg chaps, gloves and a Russian hat with ear flaps, Yang Lei appeared well-equipped to survive the winter as a delivery courier in Beijing.

He works seven days a week, but his monthly salary of about 5,000 yuan (\$723) – the average for delivery drivers – is chickenfeed given the hours he works for his employer, Tiantian Express, and the contribution couriers make to the national economy.

His pregnant wife lives in an outlying suburb of Beijing, but Yang is usually too tired to travel for more than two hours by subway and bus to return home, so he often sleeps in a house in the downtown that a local agent has rented to use as an office.

When Beijing issued a red alert for air pollution, the highest-level warning, like most of his peers the 30-year-old didn't bother to wear a mask, even though he had to ride his electric tricycle for more than 10 hours a day, exposed to fine particulate matter that can be harmful to human health.

Yang's situation illustrates the difficult conditions endured by delivery workers in China. About 2 million couriers are employed solely by delivery companies, but the number rises if those directly employed by e-commerce platforms are also included, according to a report published by Beijing Jiaotong University, AliResearch, the research arm of the e-commerce giant

Alibaba Group, and Cainiao Network, Alibaba's logistics division.

Resignations rise

The poor wages, low social status and long hours have resulted in many couriers quitting the sector. According to the report, 80 percent of workers in the company branches surveyed had worked for their employers for between six months and three years, while 50 percent had been in their jobs for less than a year, which indicates a high rate of resignations.

Zhang Jian worked for Quansu Express for about six months, but quit after he was ordered to pay compensation of 200 yuan after a parcel he delivered was accepted and signed for by a colleague of the addressee but was subsequently lost. Zhang now works for White Steed Express, a company that only delivers documents for insurance companies.

"I usually eat shaobing, a type of layered flatbread, for all three meals during the day. They are very dry and I have to drink water to swallow them. The man who sells them at the entrance of my village is from my hometown, so he gives me good price," he said.

In Beijing, the bread costs about 2 yuan per piece. Zhang said he spends about 8 yuan on his supper, 4 yuan more than on his breakfast and lunch. Even though his salary is about the same as he earned working for other delivery companies and also at a restaurant, Zhang is happy in his current job because he is allowed one day off per week. "Comparatively speaking, this is the best job I have ever had in this sector," he said.

Having worked for Shanghai YTO Express and SF Express in Beijing, Sun Bun (not his real name) has plenty of experience of the problems delivery workers face. "We have low social status and are often insulted," he said.

In July, during a torrential rainstorm, a registered letter Sun delivered to an address in Beijing was accepted by the addressee's wife, but a short time later Sun was phoned by the intended recipient who said he hadn't received the letter and began verbally abusing him. "He began swearing at me as soon as I picked up the phone. He shouted that he hadn't received the letter and demanded to know why he had received a message saying that it had been delivered," Sun said.

The caller insisted that his wife had been with him all the time and hadn't taken delivery of the letter, so Sun headed back to the man's home where he confirmed that the woman who signed for the delivery was indeed the wife of the addressee, who had been absent at the time of delivery. Sun still doesn't know what happened to the letter.

"Despite the heavy rain, I fulfilled my obligations and delivered the letter, but instead of respect, I received insults. Would that man have insulted me like that if I had higher social status?" he said.

Booming business

In 2015, the value of online retail sales in China reached 3.88 trillion

yuan, while GDP stood at more than 67.67 trillion yuan. Approximately 413 million online buyers each received an average of 40 parcels, the report said.

Meanwhile, the couriers' contribution to the economy continues to rise. In an interview with Xinhua News Agency, Ma Junsheng, head of the State Post Bureau, said 31.3 billion parcels were delivered last year as the e-commerce sector generated revenue of 400 billion yuan, compared with about 30 billion yuan in 2006. Ma referred to the sector as the "dark horse" of the economy.

Yang has been working as a courier for two and a half years. "It's common for my two colleagues and I to deliver a total of 300 to 400 parcels a day," he said. Long days spent battling the wind and dirt on the capital's streets have left his skin darkened and pitted, making him appear older than his years.

More than 4,500 branches of express delivery companies nationwide were canvassed for the report, which showed that 80 percent of employees at the branches surveyed work more than eight hours a day, although that can rise to more than 12 hours during busy periods. More than half of the branches said they paid workers from 2,000 to 6,000 yuan a month.

Yang's work is financially risky because couriers sometimes have to compensate addressees for the loss of parcels, even if the loss is not their fault. In one case, Yang handed over a parcel containing valuables to colleagues at another branch, but the parcel later went missing. However, when Yang called the branch and explained the problem, the workers refused to speak to him. The sender asked Yang for compensation of 3,000 yuan, which he was forced to pay out of his own pocket.

Yang has no personal or medical insurance – only his tricycle is insured, in case of accidents – because many express delivery companies outsource business to agents who refuse to fund insurance for couriers to keep costs down. The agents also draft their own draconian regulations to manage the employees, which has led to delivery workers being fined if they asked for leave, according to several people with experience of the sector.