

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.

[Smog returns as Spring Festival ends](#)

Many cities in northern China will face a smoggy weekend due to the windless weather, while smoke from firecrackers will worsen pollution in some areas, the national environmental authority said.

Air quality will start to decline on Thursday in many northern regions and reach a low on Friday, especially in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the Ministry of Environmental Protection said.

Other regions, including in the south and northeast, will also be blanketed by smog, which is forecast to fall to light and moderate levels on Friday, the ministry added.

After Sunday, affected regions will embrace blue skies, though some cities will see pollution lingering due to firecrackers, the National Environmental Monitoring Center said.

Setting off firecrackers, a traditional way to celebrate the Lunar New Year, can cause air pollution to suddenly worsen.

As of 6 pm on Jan 27, Lunar New Year's Eve, only 19 of the 338 cities with regular air quality monitoring had hazardous levels of pollution. However, at 2 am on Saturday, after firecrackers had been set off that night, 183 cities had hazardous air pollution, among which 62 saw the air quality index reach its upper limit, the ministry said.

Air quality in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and neighboring provinces was more severely affected by fireworks, the ministry said.

For example, Beijing saw the concentration of PM2.5 – fine particulate matter with a diameter less than 2.5 microns that is harmful to health – soar from 97 micrograms per cubic meter at 7 pm on Friday to 647 at 2 am on Saturday, dragging air quality to the most hazardous level within seven hours, said Li Yunting, head of air quality monitoring at the Beijing Environmental Monitoring Center.

Cities that banned fireworks found the move effective in controlling pollution, the ministry said.

For example, the average PM2.5 reading during the same period in Shanghai was 17, the ministry's data showed.

In addition to fireworks, coal consumption for heating and industrial production were still major sources of pollution during the holiday, the ministry said.

Wang Shuxiao, an environmental professor at Peking University, said while small plants suspended production during the holiday, emissions from large plants continued, making them a major source of pollution.

[Year of the Rooster to bring multiple missions](#)

China is set for the first working day of the Year of the Rooster as the week-long Spring Festival holiday ends Thursday.

It will be an energetic start for people and their families to achieve their dreams, and the nation will take a step closer towards the dream of creating "quanmian xiaokang," a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way by 2020.

However, this year's steps are set to be challenging, particularly for the Communist Party of China, which was founded in the Year of the Rooster, 1921 to be precise.

The Party will convene its 19th national congress this year, and it needs to accomplish several missions so that the Year of the Rooster is one of good luck.

After lifting more than 700 million people out of poverty in the past 38 years, the country still has about 45 million people living in poor conditions.

Poverty relief is high on the agenda for governments at all levels. Not a single family living in poverty will be left behind, but the closer the country gets to fully eliminating poverty, the more difficult the final steps become.

China's 13th Five-Year Plan outlines priorities for national development from 2016-2020 and proposes support for poor villages to develop signature products and services. Guidelines were also issued calling for enhanced collaboration between developed eastern regions and under-developed western regions to meet poverty-reduction targets.

These efforts have been translated into encouraging signs. At least a further 10 million people will become members of the well-off society this year.

This year is also a crucial year for pushing forward reform across the board.

Hundreds of measures were designed and released during the past four years to address issues such as urbanization, innovation and the market's role in resource allocation. Now the roadmap has taken shape and the focus for the coming years will be on delivery.

Supply-side structural reform will continue to be an economic goal for 2017, including cutting excess capacity, implementing agricultural reforms, boosting the real economy and nurturing new growth.

The restructuring of China's economy and the upgrading of industry is expected to generate huge new demand.

Time is of the essence for reforms in state-owned enterprises as well as in finance and social security. Such sectors concern the development of the country, whose GDP growth stood at 6.7 percent in 2016, a three-decade low, but outpacing most other major economies.

In major political reform, China will establish a national supervisory commission and create a law on national supervision.

Amid efforts to build a clean CPC, the fight against corruption has gained “crushing momentum,” netting both “tigers” and “flies,” with no letup expected in the future.

On the global stage, China will stick to its commitment to encourage globalization and cooperation, despite difficulties.

In troubled times with a sluggish world economy and a changing geopolitical order, the wise choice is to move forward together.

China is preparing for a host of events of global significance this year, including a Belt and Road forum for international cooperation in Beijing in May, and the ninth BRICS leaders’ summit, in southeast China’s coastal city of Xiamen in September.

The attitude of openness, inclusivity and sharing is in sharp contrast to the retreat into protectionism and isolation from certain western countries.

This year will be a test of the wisdom needed to maintain sustained, stable and better growth in China-U.S. relations. Although the Trump administration has yet to formulate its China policy, the general trend of cooperation is irreversible and the only right choice for both countries.

Any conflict or trade war could deal a blow to the development of the world’s two largest economies. The bottom-line is respecting each other’s core interests.

Believing in a shared destiny for mankind, China will continue to expand its circle of friends.

As Michael Moller, head of the United Nations Office at Geneva, put it: “If things go well for China and the Chinese people, the chances are it’s going to go well for a lot of other people around the planet.”

Coincidentally, the first working day of the Chinese new year is “lichun,” or the beginning of spring, the first of the 24 solar terms in the Chinese ancient calendar.

As we wave goodbye to winter, China stands with the world in wishing for a great spring.

Fire kills 39 people in China’s Spring Festival holiday

A total of 13,796 fires occurred during China’s week-long Spring Festival holiday that ends Thursday, killing 39 people and forcing the evacuation of 10,523 others, the Ministry of Public Security said.

The fires resulted in direct economic losses of 44.63 million yuan (about 6.49 million U.S. dollars), marking a 54.1 percent drop compared with the same period last year, the ministry said in a statement.

The number of fires and fire casualties decreased by 11.8 percent and 26.4 percent respectively year on year, it said.

No fire claimed more than five lives during the holiday, it noted.

Fires are usually caused by setting off fireworks and firecrackers during the holiday as the Chinese believed the noise will drive away bad spirits and bring good luck.

However, sales of fireworks have dropped in recent years in cities amid pollution concerns and government restrictions. Nationwide, 444 cities have banned fireworks and 764 other cities imposed restrictions on setting off fireworks, according to the ministry.

[Wenzhou buildings collapse, many buried](#)

An unknown number of people were buried in the debris after three residential buildings collapsed Thursday morning in Wenzhou, a rich industrial city in east China's Zhejiang Province.

The buildings were about five stories tall and were inhabited with people, sources with the local government said.

The accidents happened at around 8 a.m. in Baizhangji township of Wencheng county.

Rescue work is going on.