

Chinese truck driver driven to suicide by exploitative conditions

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25 April 2021

A 51-year-old long-haul truck driver, Jin Deqiang, committed suicide by drinking pesticide after being unfairly fined 2,000 RMB (\$US285) at a freight truck checkpoint in Tangshan, a city in the northern China province of Hebei. His death on April 5 tragically exposes the highly exploitative and harsh working conditions in which millions of long-haul truckers are struggling on a daily basis.

Earlier that day, Jin loaded his freight in the city of Tangshan and entered the checkpoint around 1 p.m. According to the official investigation launched after Jin's suicide caught widespread public attention, staff at the checkpoint found that the satellite positioning system, BeiDou, on Jin's truck was offline and asked him to come into the office for further inspection. Instead, Jin left the checkpoint to purchase some pesticide.

When Jin returned, he was told that he would be fined 2,000 RMB according to transportation regulations in Hebei Province. The official investigation especially emphasized that Jin "quickly drank" the pesticide "without any warning" and that there was "no physical clash" between Jin and checkpoint staff.

The official investigation falsely claimed the tragic suicide of Jin was the result of his personal overreaction. Furthermore, it indicated that none of the state agencies involved should be held responsible.

The official investigation stressed that Jin purchased the pesticide before he was informed of the amount of the fine. What it failed to mention was that faults with the BeiDou positioning system have been a longstanding problem for all truck drivers. It is highly likely that Jin had been fined over the same issue previously and was very aware of the fine awaiting him even before talking to the checkpoint staff.

According to a survey by the Ministry of Transport at

the end of last year, nearly 30 percent of the positioning devices on trucks did not pass the quality check. Unstable data upload and connection with the master platform is one of the major problems.

A large number of truck drivers have posted questions online over the years, asking why their positioning system went offline and what to do when they were fined over it. A truck driver from the same hometown as Jin explained in an interview that a disconnection can be caused when entering a satellite blind zone or by hardware issues. He said, if something went wrong with the device's hardware, the driver was only left with two choices: keep going under the risk of being fined, or return to where the device could be repaired. No truck driver would choose the second option for obvious reasons.

Another truck driver also made clear in a video on social media that it is almost impossible for drivers to know when the positioning system goes offline. In many cases, the screen is still on but the device can not be found on the master platform.

Besides frequent connection issues, this satellite positioning device causes truck drivers many other headaches. For instance, drivers are not allowed to drive more than four hours at a time; police can check their driving activity on this device when pulling them over.

In many cases, however, it is unrealistic to strictly adhere to this regulation. Drivers might be at a location on the highway where there is no nearby service station, or get caught in a traffic jam, or be denied entry into a service station due to overcapacity. Thus, drivers are in constant fear of punishment for 'fatigue-driving' that consists of a 200 RMB fine and the deduction of six of their 12 licence points.

Behind these in-truck positioning devices that

frequently malfunction stand major financial interests—manufacturers, tech companies and state officials. As early as 2014, truck drivers were legally required to install a position-tracking device. The initial installation usually cost about 2,000 or 3,000 RMB (\$285 or \$428), and then drivers have to pay a service fee of about 1,000 RMB annually. In China, there are at least 600,000 long-haul truck drivers using this type of positioning system, so the annual service fees alone make for a very lucrative business.

No matter what the device, all are connected to a monopolistic master platform developed by the Beijing ZhongJiaoXingLu Information Technology Company. A portion of the annual service fee paid by each driver eventually goes to this company which made a net profit of more than 1 billion RMB (\$154 million) last year.

Moreover, the malfunctioning of positioning devices has been exploited to generate revenues for many freight truck checkpoints across the country through fines. According to the 2014 regulation requiring all trucks to carry a positioning system, drivers will be fined 800 RMB if their device goes offline. If it is vandalized, the fine will range from 2,000 to 5,000 RMB. In the regulation specific to Hebei Province where Jin committed suicide, drivers are fined 2,000 RMB if they have manually turned it off.

The safety regulation might be reasonable, but the poor quality of the devices means Jin and countless other truck drivers are hit with fines that are onerous and unfair. The satellite positioning system is no longer aimed at ensuring safety for truck drivers and the public, but at extracting profits from them at all levels of operation.

The positioning device is only one aspect of the bleak social reality facing truck drivers. In his last words sent in a chat group of fellow truck drivers, Jin said that he chose to commit suicide “not because [his life] is not worth 2,000 RMB, but because [he] wants to speak out for all truck drivers [with his death].”

Jin came from a rural village in Hebei Province and finished only elementary school. Since then, he worked in kiln factories and foundries. About 10 years ago, he entered the long-haul trucking industry. In order to buy a truck that cost about 300,000 RMB (\$45,000), he had to take out a loan for a third of that amount, while borrowing more from his relatives and friends.

The driver from the same village as Jin explained that truck drivers usually drive 15 hours a day and cover roughly 5,000 kilometres in 10 days, earning about 15,000 RMB (\$2,250) a month. That might sound like a relatively decent wage in China, but a large chunk goes into repaying loans, mileage, fines, tolls, maintenance and the expenses on the road. In Jin’s case, he was also supporting his 70-year-old mother, his wife and three children.

Long-haul trucking also takes its toll in the lives and health of drivers. In 2019, there were 3.7 freight truck related traffic accidents per million kilometres, and the death rate among truck drivers is around 1 percent according to the White Book on Smart Safety in China’s Road Freight Industry.

Moreover, due to the sedentary life, most truck drivers have metabolic diseases. In Jin’s last words, he explained that after 10 years in this industry, he “not only has not made much money, but has also fallen ill everywhere: three health indices [blood pressure, blood sugar and blood lipids] are dangerously high; there are also issues with my heart.”

Jin’s tragic story is not the only one. On April 12, a truck driver was fined at a checkpoint in the southeastern province of Guangdong for overloading. He had, however, already passed through five checkpoints without a problem. After his multiple requests to re-weigh the freight were rejected, he resorted to slashing his wrist. Only then did the checkpoint staff re-weigh his freight and let him go without a fine. The checkpoint staff made no attempt to contact a hospital.

One of Jin’s childhood friends commented on his death, “What better choices do the vulnerable have? If they don’t resort to extreme actions, how else can they bring public attention [to their plight]?”

Jin’s suicide attracted a great deal of public attention. The overwhelming sympathy for his plight is an indication that far from workers viewing his death as a result of his personal failings, there is growing social opposition to the capitalist system overseen by the Chinese Communist Party regime.



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