

The protests in China and the lifting of Zero-COVID

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Over the weekend, protests took place in several Chinese cities, with most centered among students on university campuses. Based on images posted on social media, these demonstrations do not appear to be massive. However, given the authoritarian character of the Xi Jinping regime, the protests are significant political events which certainly undermine the image of social stability and universal contentment that Xi sought to present at the recently concluded congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The actual scale and aims of the protests are obscured by the response of the Western media, which is using them as an occasion for propaganda against China's Zero-COVID policy. For the last two years, it has demanded that China lift Zero-COVID regardless of how many millions would be killed or disabled by the virus. If its propaganda is to be believed, all of China is now begging to be infected with COVID-19.

There is no question that there is a serious social and political crisis in China, which is intensifying after the CCP issued its "Twenty Articles" on November 11, initiating a relaxation of the Zero-COVID policy. On Monday, China's National Health Commission (NHC) reported 40,347 new COVID-19 cases, the fifth consecutive day of record infections in what has become the country's most geographically widespread outbreak to date.

In response to this deepening public health crisis, local officials have implemented partial lockdowns and mass testing in some of the worst-affected districts in Beijing, Guangzhou, Chongqing and other cities, while stopping short of citywide lockdowns which have proven necessary to fully suppress viral transmission.

The weekend's protests were prompted by a tragic fire that took place last Thursday at a high-rise apartment building in Urumqi, in Xinjiang province,

which killed 10 people and injured nine.

The Western media and various commentators on Chinese social media assert that barricades set up due to lockdowns prevented firefighters from reaching the building in time. But these claims are contradicted by the fact that the obstructing bollards—vertical posts that serve as traffic barriers—were erected years before the pandemic. Claims that residents were not allowed to evacuate are also contradicted by videos showing residents fleeing the building. Moreover, the district where the fire took place was not under a strict lockdown at the time.

The tragic fire in Urumqi was clearly the result of inadequate fire safety within the building and poor urban planning which prevented the movement of firefighters, problems which exist in every major city internationally.

The weekend's protesters were largely motivated by anger over the negligence of municipal authorities and sympathy for those who died in the Urumqi fire. It may well be the case that a section of the protesters—especially those with access to the Western media—actually believe that the Zero-COVID policy played a role in the disaster.

The restoration of capitalism has created an affluent middle-class social constituency, an important base of the CCP bureaucracy. This social layer is more likely to use virtual private networks or other methods to bypass China's Great Firewall and access Western media and social media. Thus, for the past year they have been bombarded by the relentless propaganda claiming that "Omicron is mild," that "if you're vaccinated, catching COVID is now like the flu," and above all the lie by US President Joe Biden that "the pandemic is over."

However, it would be incorrect to accept the media's portrayal of the protests as uniformly favoring the

abandonment of anti-COVID measures and politically reactionary. Significantly, there have been multiple reports of students singing the “Internationale,” the socialist anthem of international working class solidarity.

But there is also anger among less affluent sections of the middle class as well as the working class, caused by the economic impacts of the CCP’s implementation of Zero-COVID. The government has provided virtually no financial assistance to workers during lockdowns, and recently began charging the population the cost of testing.

Last Tuesday, thousands of workers at the Foxconn sweatshop in Zhengzhou protested against their horrendous conditions and lack of pay. The facility, where up to 350,000 workers produce roughly half of the world’s Apple iPhones, has been under a closed-loop system since October due to a COVID-19 outbreak. In order to maintain production, workers have been confined in prison-like conditions at the factory instead of being sent home.

Contrary to its portrayal in the Western media, the protest outside Foxconn was not “anti-lockdown” or against Zero-COVID. Rather, in addition to demanding full pay, the workers, all of whom were wearing masks to prevent viral transmission, were also fighting for more regular COVID-19 testing and safer isolation and quarantine protocols.

Underlying the frustration driving the protests in China is the fact that any Zero-COVID policy applied exclusively to one country confronts insurmountable problems. There is no national solution to the pandemic, which is fundamentally a world problem that requires a globally coordinated response. In the absence of such a unified world movement, the public health and social crisis in China will only intensify in the coming weeks and months.

The greatest danger now confronts China’s elderly population, which remains the country’s least vaccinated age group, largely due to misconceptions about the vaccines and traditional Chinese medicine. According to the latest NHC data, fully 21 million Chinese people 60 years and older are entirely unvaccinated, and 21.5 million people above 80 years old have not received a necessary booster shot.

A study published in May estimated that the full lifting of Zero-COVID in China would kill upwards of

1.6 million people in the span of just six months. Since that time, vaccination rates have stalled and immunity has waned for most of the Chinese population, further elevating the dangers.

Beyond the immense risks facing the elderly, the entire Chinese population faces the threat of Long COVID, which can affect nearly every organ in the body. Throughout the world, tens of millions of people have been disabled by COVID-19, including fully vaccinated people. Studies have shown that one’s risk of developing Long COVID is only slightly reduced by vaccination, and that reinfections with new variants compound one’s risk of death and Long COVID, regardless of vaccination status.

It is imperative that the Chinese and international working class develop a joint struggle to stop the lifting of Zero-COVID in China and to apply these public health principles internationally.

Only through a globally coordinated deployment of mass testing, contact tracing, the renovation of infrastructure, the use of high-quality masks, paid lockdowns, the development of more advanced vaccines, and all other measures to prevent viral transmission, can the pandemic be stopped once and for all.



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