

# China, working conditions: People's Daily on the Side of Bosses During the 996-ICU Campaign

Wednesday 5 June 2019, by [LIU Yang](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2019).

**In March 2019, a project called '996.ICU' [1] suddenly became a hot issue on GitHub, and subsequently sparked aroused attention on China's social networks. '996' means working from 9am to 9pm, and a week has 6 working days with this schedule; 'ICU' is the abbreviation of intensive care unit. Obviously, this project is complaining that long working hours can cause fatal damage to employees.**

China's labor laws stipulate eight-hour day and only allow at most 3 hours paid overtime per day (or no more than 36 hours per month). However, longer overtime has become a common phenomenon. The widespread 996 discussions have confirmed this fact. In the past, white-collar workers, such as programmers, can improve their personal working conditions through job-hopping. Since 996 has become an industry standard in IT and tech companies, space for this kind of individual solution is getting smaller and smaller.

In recent years, many young people in IT industry start calling themselves 'code farmers' in a self-deprecating way. This reflects that more and more white-collar workers have realized that their positions within the capitalist hierarchy are not much higher than manual workers'. Besides, white-collar jobs with 996 schedule require physical strength as well—news show that people were so tired that they fainted on the way home [2].

Although the campaign against 996 was initiated by programmers, it has been responded by other white-collar workers as well. This is understandable. Even in IT companies, jobs are diverse—sales, customer service, finance, marketing, administration, etc.; and many non-IT companies, in which most employees are not programmers, are also implementing 996 as standard schedule (see the list of 996 companies [3]). Therefore, this campaign can be said to be a collective protest carries out by white-collar workers, which is quite rare in China.

Nevertheless, so far this is a very moderate campaign. Participants try to keep anonymous and most of their activities are on the Internet. The campaign has said clearly that this is not a political movement and there is no unified demand. Some unidentified people are maintaining the information sharing platform, but you can hardly call it an organization. Obviously, people who initiate the campaign do not want to excessively provoke the state and big capitalists—they just present themselves as victims of labor law violations. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that the campaign could result in some kind of radical actions in the near future.

But this campaign has inspired many white-collar workers to take a stand—revealing the illegal working hours of their own companies, discussing the campaign with others, satirizing the bosses' hypocrisy—although these are small things, by doing them people's consciousness changes.

Another achievement of the campaign is the international solidarity. The most noticeable one comes from the workers of Microsoft and GitHub—so far 486 of them have signed an open letter to support the campaign [4]. Apart from adding moral pressure and increasing media attention, those overseas workers also promise to lobby their companies to keep the ‘996.ICU’ platform uncensored and available to everyone.

The big capitalists’ comments about the campaign are thought-provoking as well.

Ma Yun, who’s the founder of Alibaba, said that ‘996 is a huge blessing’ and ‘how do you achieve the success you want without paying extra effort and time’.

After a lot of criticism appeared on the Internet, Ma posted another argument with nationalist sophistication: ‘...just because there were such a group of people working with a 996 or 997 schedule in the past, China mastered the technologies of atomic bomb, hydrogen bomb and satellite in the last century, got world-renowned achievements in the past forty years, manufactured manned spaceships such as Shenzhou 5 and Shenzhou 6...which will give us confidence in the future...’

Liu Qiangdong, who’s another famous magnate in China and the founder of JD.com, also post an article to support 996. He wrote: ‘...lazy people in JD are not my brothers—true brothers must fight together, take responsibility and pressure together, and enjoy the fruits of success together!... JD will never force employees working 995 or 996, but every employee must have a fighting spirit!’

Although no one believes that the CCP is a workers’ party, its Party Constitution still says that it is the vanguard of Chinese working class [5]. Thus, the Chinese capitalists normally do not make anti-workers’ rights statement publicly by themselves. In my opinion, what make Ma and Liu dare to openly challenge eight-hour day—the milestone of the international workers’ movement, is not their class consciousness, but inspiration from the state.

An article published by *People’s Daily*, which is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, echoes the bosses’ rhetoric [6]:

*“Some people call China’s economic miracle ‘hardworking revolution’. The hard works and struggles of the Chinese people have turned the impossible into the possible—China only took dozens of years to complete the industrialization that the developed countries took hundreds of years to complete. Hardworking and struggle will still be the key words of our fast-moving society. Here is the enlightenment we have learned from the 996 discussion: the vitality of China in the future will depend on whether workers can work joyfully and whether all the sources of innovation can be fully exploited.”*

Manufacturing workers in China have never enjoyed eight-hour day in the last forty years, and now the Chinese ruling class may have an agenda to extend working hours for everyone. The terrible economic situation, especially the pressure of the U.S.-China trade war, may be a major impulsion behind it.

According to the calculation made by ‘996.ICU’ [7], if a company changes its workers’ schedule from eight-hour day to 996, a fair wage must be 2.275 times of the original one at least. No wage increase or insignificant increase will result in higher exploitation rate and higher profits. Even companies increase the pay fairly, the state still benefits from more taxes and higher GDP.

The institutionalization of longer working hours will also lead to race-to-the-bottom competition among workers. For example, young people in their early twenties generally have the energy and time to work 996 or even longer; in order to compete with them in the job market, older people and those who need time to take care of family, may have to accept lower wages or unfavorable working

conditions.

The famous nineteenth century American labor song says [8]: ‘Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!’ The Chinese ruling class probably does not want the working class to have too much free time, because the latter will not only spend the hours entertaining themselves, but also reading, thinking, writing, satirizing, organizing and protesting! Thus, I suspect the 996 agenda may also have a purpose of creating obedient citizens who will be too busy to question or challenge the system.

Although the current anti-996 campaign can hardly reverse the trend, its propaganda and debate will further disillusion the fake middle-class or petty-bourgeois consciousness of the urban white-collar workers, and let them further recognize who their real enemies are.

The anti-996 campaign shows that some of the tech workers could be strong opponents of the Chinese ruling class—independently, they can use their knowledge and technology to carry out propaganda, keep anonymous, break through the Internet censorship, and establish international support. If a large number of them decide to fight for the interests of their own class in the future struggles, it will create nightmares for the other side. Bank workers can paralyze the financial system; communication workers can shut down the monitoring network; media workers can refuse to execute the censorship; and IT workers can turn off the Great Fire Wall. Even if the army is dispatched, several programmers in critical positions can easily block the armored fleets by disturbing the traffic control system to create highway jams—just as General Kornilov’s troops could never reach Petrograd in September 1917.

Moreover, tech workers or white-collar workers are not the only ones who suffer from 996 schedule. The victims of long working hours also include factory workers, food deliverers, couriers, drivers, cleaners, waiters, and even government employees. Thus, the anti-996 campaign has a potential to promote unity and build a general sense of solidarity among the working class. This is why everyone of us, whether a tech worker or not, and whether a victim of 996 or not, should all take a stand against 996 in a variety of ways.

**Liu Yang**

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**P.S.**

- Translated by Shefu.
- The Chinese original post:  
<https://borderless-hk.com/2019/04/30/996-iccu-it996/>

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## Footnotes

- [1] <https://github.com/996icu/996.ICU>
- [2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQREcJce57I>
- [3] <https://github.com/996icu/996.ICU/tree/master/blacklist>

[4] <https://github.com/msworkers/support.996.ICU>

[5] [http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/2007-10/31/content\\_6219108.htm](http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/2007-10/31/content_6219108.htm)

[6] <https://m.21jingji.com/article/20190414/herald/edbce4844cd94c2e77d7942e85cd4b82.html>

[7] [https://996.icu/#/zh\\_CN](https://996.icu/#/zh_CN)

[8] <https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/music/eighthour.html>