

From Xinjiang to Shanghai, Protests Grow in China over COVID Restrictions After Fatal Apartment Fire

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Unprecedented protests have erupted in multiple Chinese cities over President Xi Jinping's strict zero-COVID policies, which have resulted in extended strict lockdowns across the country. The protests were triggered by a deadly fire Thursday at an apartment building in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, where local COVID restrictions reportedly prevented firefighters from reaching the trapped residents.

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This comes as hundreds of workers at the world's largest iPhone factory, Foxconn, clashed last week with police over restrictions that have forced many workers to live at the factory. "China now for three years has seen a level of lockdown that is simply inconceivable," says Cornell labor scholar Eli Friedman, who calls the cross-class, cross-ethnic protests a "movement against surveillance." Friedman says although China enforces the country's COVID restrictions, top U.S. corporations like Apple and Tesla are implicated in upholding the closed-loop management system at Foxconn and other Chinese manufacturers.

Transcript

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GUESTS

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Unprecedented protests have erupted in multiple Chinese cities over President Xi Jinping's strict zero-COVID policies, which have resulted in extended strict lockdowns across the country. The protests were triggered by a deadly fire Thursday at an apartment building in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, where local COVID restrictions reportedly prevented firefighters from reaching the trapped residents. This comes as hundreds of workers at the world's largest iPhone factory, Foxconn, clashed last week with police over restrictions that have forced many workers to live at the factory. "China now for three years has seen a level of lockdown that is simply inconceivable," says Cornell labor scholar Eli Friedman, who calls the cross-class, cross-ethnic protests a "movement against surveillance." Friedman says although China enforces the country's COVID restrictions, top U.S. corporations like Apple and Tesla are implicated in upholding the closed-loop management system at Foxconn and other Chinese manufacturers.

Transcript

AMY GOODMAN: Protests have erupted in Beijing, in Shanghai, in Wuhan, in Guangzhou and other Chinese cities over China's strict zero-COVID policies. The protests were triggered by a deadly fire Thursday at an apartment building in Urumqi, the capital of the far-western province Xinjiang. There are reports that local COVID-19 protocols prevented firefighters from reaching residents trapped in the burning building, resulting in the deaths of at least 10 people, including children.

On Friday, crowds took to the streets in Urumqi. Protests then spread to other large cities and campuses, including Tsinghua University in Beijing, where Chinese leader Xi Jinping studied. Many of the protesters held up blank pieces of white paper. One man in Beijing told Reuters, "The white paper represents everything we want to say but cannot say." Protesters say police in Shanghai have begun detaining people who took part in the demonstrations.

PROTESTER: [translated] In Shanghai, a lot of people have already been detained, not only last night. They did it for everybody, for all the people, for the delivery guys not to be locked in their apartments, for everybody to be able to receive medicines and food. We need to help these people. Free those people in Shanghai.

AMY GOODMAN: On Sunday, police in Shanghai arrested BBC reporter Ed Lawrence while he was covering a protest. He was held for hours. The BBC says he was beaten and kicked by the police officers.

The protests in China mark an unprecedented challenge to Xi Jinping's zero-COVID policies, which has resulted in extended strict lockdowns across China. Last week, hundreds of workers at the world's largest iPhone factory clashed with Chinese police over COVID restrictions, which have forced many workers to live at the Foxconn factory. Videos posted on social media show workers being tear-gassed and beaten outside the plant. Earlier today, China announced it would ease some COVID restrictions but affirmed its zero-COVID strategy.

The protests come as COVID cases are at a record high in China. There were just over 40,000 new infections reported Sunday, a new single-day high. Throughout the pandemic, China has reported far fewer COVID cases and deaths than the United States and other nations. The United States is

currently recording an average of 42,000 cases a day. Since the start of the pandemic, the U.S. has recorded nearly 1.1 million COVID deaths. China's official COVID death toll is just over 5,000. Last week, China recorded its first COVID death in six months.

To talk more about the protests in China, we're joined by Eli Friedman. He's an associate professor and chair of international and comparative labor at Cornell University. He's the author of *The Urbanization of People: The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City*. He's also co-editor of the new book *The China Question: Toward Left Perspectives*. His recent [article](#) for the *Asian Labour Review* is titled "Foxconn's Great Escape."

Professor Friedman, thanks so much for being with us. Let's start off by talking about this uprising over the last few days in Beijing, in the financial capital Shanghai, in Urumqi and other places. The significance of this?

ELI FRIEDMAN: Well, thanks for having me, Amy.

This is unbelievably significant for a number of reasons. It is the largest protest movement that Xi Jinping has faced in the 10 years since he came to power. There was a protest that was probably larger in scale in 2012, just before he came to power, which was an anti-Japanese protest over some disputed islands, but we haven't seen anything like this. And there's a couple of things that are really significant about it.

The first is that it's nationwide. So, as we've just heard, these protests are appearing in cities across the country, from the far west to the more populous east coast, and that's extremely unusual in China. We see localized, small-scale protests, but this nationwide scale is really unprecedented.

The other thing that I think is really important, and maybe of greater concern to the authorities, is the fact that it has incorporated a really diverse group of people. We see a cross-class alliance. You've mentioned the workers in Foxconn, and then we have the students at Tsinghua, the most elite university, students also at Peking University. We see middle-class people in Shanghai. It's also a cross-ethnic movement, and I think that that hasn't necessarily been fully appreciated. The fact that this is a response to a fire that happened in Urumqi is incredibly important, given the background of repression, surveillance, of mass incarceration that has happened to Muslim minorities there. And so, this is really one of the first times that we've seen this kind of cross-ethnic form of mobilization. And so, for all these reasons, it does present a really big challenge.

AMY GOODMAN: So, yes, you're talking about the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, then the belief, whether it is true or not, that the firefighters — now video has come out on social media of the fire trucks trying to get to that building where the fire was. But for people to understand how strict this COVID crackdown has been, I've been talking to people who have family in China, talking about, throughout, the level of people not being able to move. One 80-year-old man in a city that is not thought of as a crackdown city has had a hundred tests in a month. If you go in the subway, your card will detect if — they'll see where you were, and so if someone four cars down comes down positive with COVID, you'll all be locked down in wherever you live. So, talk about what the protesters are saying. They'll also be very sarcastic and say things like "More crackdown, more tests."

ELI FRIEDMAN: I think it's really difficult for people outside of China to understand the intensity of the lockdowns. For those of us in the United States, when we think of that period of, quote-unquote, "lockdown" back in the spring of 2020, they were never rigorously enforced. Most people were still able to leave their house. China now for three years has seen a level of lockdown that is simply inconceivable, in some cases with apartment buildings being locked. Some people have reported

their own personal apartment doors being chained shut so they actually cannot leave. So it's really a kind of house arrest.

One of the other things that's really significant, and we can get into the underlying causes of this, but I think that we should also think of this as a movement against surveillance. Over the last three years, the state has unrolled a really encompassing and extremely invasive surveillance system through the system of health codes. And so, as you were just suggesting, if you were a contact, a close contact or even a secondary contact, of someone who later tested positive, then your health code turns red. If your health code turns red, then you're not allowed to leave your house until you have a series of negative tests. This, of course, can be extremely disruptive to people's lives.

So, the way that it intervenes in people's lives, the way that it disrupts basic sort of social patterns, the way that it disrupts livelihoods — and this is particularly a problem for working-class people, for informal workers who need to be out and about in the city and who aren't just white-collar workers who can hop on a Zoom call and do their job from home — it's had really significant effects for people. And just again, imagine that this has gone on for three years. You know, it really has a huge impact, I think, on people's mental well-being. We've seen a huge increase in mental health crises, in suicides, in domestic violence.

And just one final point on this, the Chinese government, as well as society more broadly, did a great job mobilizing and really crushing the virus back in 2020. They've saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. But there's also other unaccounted-for consequences, and it's been extremely difficult for people to get access to healthcare for non-COVID-related problems. So, if you're in a lockdown, and there have been case after case where — you know, you've had pregnant women who have miscarried. You've had people who haven't been able to get dialysis because their code won't allow them to access the hospital. There are real health consequences that come from this intensity of lockdown, as well, for all these non-COVID-related things.

AMY GOODMAN: And, of course, people not being able to get insulin and other medications. Now, Professor Friedman, the white paper being held up, talk about the significance of this.

ELI FRIEDMAN: Yeah. Well, it's really interesting to see how this developed. This was actually something, I think, that people are referencing a movement that came out of Hong Kong back in 2019, whether or not they're doing so consciously or not. This is something that emerged in Hong Kong, and this is in a situation where censorship is so overwhelming. Of course, the Chinese internet is scrubbed assiduously of things that the government deems to be inappropriate. And so, one of the things that people have been doing online is just repeating these words. They'll say, like, "Good, good, good." You know, these are things that cannot be censored.

And the white paper is another indicator of that. In a situation where you can't say anything, you just hold up the piece of paper, and that is a form of resistance. I think that the white paper is quite interesting. It's quite — it is a very different kind of demand than the ones that originally emerged in the Foxconn riot, which were, of course, workplace-oriented. It's different than the fire safety and the health stuff. This is really a question about freedom of speech and censorship. And I think it's not surprising, therefore, that it's gotten more currency among students, among intellectuals and middle-class people in the large eastern cities. So, you know, it's also very open to interpretation. I'm sure other people have different kinds of interpretation. But it's a form of resistance when all kinds of speech can be criminalized.

AMY GOODMAN: And, I mean, you have in the Chinese national anthem the reference to overthrowing slavery, and you have this repeated now in many different places, the issue — this particular issue. Explain what is meant by this and how this is now, yes, triggered by COVID policies

but going to a level of challenge of Xi Jinping that hasn't been seen before.

ELI FRIEDMAN: Well, that's the first thing that's worth emphasizing, is this kind of direct challenge to Xi's power, and even to the power of the Communist Party, we've not seen at all in recent years. There was this incident just before the 20th Party Congress earlier this fall, this guy at the Sitong Bridge who called on — who called for Xi Jinping to step down. And then, just a couple days ago, something which previously would have been absolutely unimaginable, you had people in the streets of Shanghai saying, "Down with Xi Jinping, and down with the Communist Party." You know, so that is really just a significant shift, I think, from where we've been.

With respect to the question of slavery, you know, I think one of the realizations, particularly that middle-class Han Chinese people have had going back to the Shanghai lockdowns, which were last April, was really the unchecked power of the state. Now, the state's capacity to surveil, to repress and to exploit, I think, has been long known by lots of people in China, by migrant workers who come from the rural areas to the cities who don't enjoy rights, certainly by ethnic minorities, by the Uyghurs, by Tibetans. This has been something that they've known. During the Shanghai lockdown and, I think, over the last several months, it's come to the attention of other people that there are no checks on state power, and that if the state wants to lock you in your house indefinitely until they say you're free to go, they have the capacity to do that. And I think for people, particularly for young people who grew up, you know, without the same kind of material deprivation that their parents might have, this is really — this has been really shocking. And I've seen it personally with many of my students and friends that I have in China, as well. So, yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: Professor Friedman, finally, you mentioned Foxconn. I mean, we're talking about the largest iPhone factory in the world. Are we talking about hundreds of thousands of people who work there? And explain how this has also been a hotbed of unrest with the crackdown there and what's happened.

ELI FRIEDMAN: Yeah, the Foxconn piece of it is really important. You know, I'm a labor scholar and a labor activist, and I hope that this doesn't get erased from the story of what's happening, because it was a really important catalyst for all the protests that we're seeing nationwide.

It's also really important because what Foxconn highlights is that while the zero-COVID policy is implemented by the Chinese government, Xi Jinping personally takes responsibility for it, that all of these multinational corporations, including America's most valuable corporations, like Apple and Tesla, are implicated in this.

So, what they've done — and this, again, I think, highlights the sort of the class nature of these lockdowns, that people experience them differently, working-class people have been subjected to what's called closed-loop management. And this has happened at Foxconn. It happened earlier in Shanghai at the Tesla factory and at other Apple suppliers. Workers go into the factory, and they're not allowed to leave until they're told that the outbreak is under control. In some cases back in Shanghai, they were in the closed loop for more than 70 days, just sleeping on the shop floor, cut off from their communities, cut off from their friends.

And in the case of Foxconn, we saw back in October that people were being put into quarantine in unsafe conditions. They weren't being given adequate medical attention. They weren't being given adequate food. And so, thousands of people just escaped. They ran for the exits. Their employer was not letting them, so they literally just jumped over the fences. And then, subsequently, they tried to bring people in. They were not forthcoming about how much money they would actually be receiving, or they tried to backtrack. And this led to this — probably the most significant worker uprising of the past 10 years, incredibly violent scenes.

And so, the significance of this is that, you know, when we have this kind of resistance against zero-COVID, yes, it's against a specific Chinese government policy, but America's most valuable corporations are implicated in this. And so I think that it's really important for them to respond to this.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Eli Friedman, we want to thank you for being with us. Of course, this is an issue we're going to continue to cover. associate professor and chair of international and comparative labor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, author of *The Urbanization of People: The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City*, also co-editor of *The China Question: Toward Left Perspectives*. We'll also link to your [article](#) for the *Asian Labour Review* titled "Foxconn's Great Escape."

Next up, we go to Missouri, where the state is preparing to execute Kevin Johnson Tuesday, but a special prosecutor is urging Missouri's Supreme Court to stay the execution because of racism. Meanwhile, Johnson's 19-year-old daughter has been barred from witnessing the execution because she's under the age of 21. Stay with us.

[break]

P.S.

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