

Asian Markets

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Chinese businesses guard against wave of infections feared after COVID easing

By Siyi Liu and Josh Horwitz



[1/2] A waiter guides a customer to scan a health QR code outside a restaurant as coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreaks continue in Shanghai, China, December 8, 2022. REUTERS/Aly Song


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BEIJING/SHANGHAI, Dec 8 (Reuters) - Manufacturers and eateries keen to stay open in China are preferring to err on the side of caution, by retaining COVID-19 curbs until they get a clearer picture of just how workplaces will be affected by the easing of stringent measures.

The world's second largest economy is bracing for a wave of infections as it relaxes a "zero-COVID" policy, winding down a campaign of hunting out and isolating infections as it hands back to individuals most of the task of detection and treatment.

In sparse comments on workplace conditions, however, national health officials have urged that high-risk areas should be much more narrowly defined, while production or business operations continue elsewhere. [read more](#)



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"We are still under closed loop management with workers not allowed to leave the factory," said a manager at a leading stainless steel mill in eastern China, who gave his surname as Dai.

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"It won't relax any time soon," he added, saying the mill wanted to hold down infections as much as possible with the system in which workers live and work onsite, isolated from the wider world.

The comments came as businesses told Reuters they were sizing up the new uncertainty, expecting to have to grapple with long periods of absence by sick workers that could crimp operations, perhaps for months longer.

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While authorities have scrapped testing as a pre-requisite for many activities, hotpot chain Haidilao ([6862.HK](#)) said it would continue to require daily PCR tests for staff working at its dine-in outlets in Beijing, the capital.

Many nations exiting COVID curbs overcame similar challenges in restoring business activity, but Chinese firms' scramble spotlights the difficulties ahead in reviving a slowing economy rendered a global outlier by the zero-COVID approach.

"Many of my workers with heavy mortgage burdens want to earn more money to have a good Lunar New Year," said Yang Bingben, whose factory in the eastern city of Wenzhou makes valves for industrial use.

Yang, who was referring to China's biggest holiday, which falls in January next year, added that authorities had given him little guidance on what to do if his plant, with a workforce of more than 30, was hit by a mass infection.

As he stockpiles medicines against such an eventuality, he has told staff to follow new guidelines to stay home if they got infected, in which case he plans to pay them half their wages.

To avoid disruption from any infections, Yang initially considered shutting the factory early ahead of the Lunar New Year, but ultimately set aside that option.


In Beijing, some state firms and banks are grouping staff into teams to ensure work continues despite any outbreak, sources told Reuters.

Andy Chen, an employee of a state-owned company, said the move came after someone in his office tested positive, adding, "Staff are now divided into half and take weekly turns to work in the office."

In the southern city of Dongguan, Agilian Technology, a contract manufacturer of consumer electronics, will continue to require arriving workers to display health codes, while drawing up a more comprehensive plan against a big outbreak.

"I am confident it will be a mess for about 3 months," said

the firm's executive vice president, Renaud Anjoran. "We will see."



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