Foxconn workers threaten suicide protest in China

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Hundreds of protesting workers in Foxconn's Wuhan plant threatened to commit collective suicide by jumping from the factory roof in early January. The incident is another indictment of the giant electronics sweatshop's brutal treatment of its workers, made possible by the police-state regime imposed by the Beijing government.

Taiwanese-owned Foxconn is the world's largest manufacturer of electronics for major international corporations such as Apple, Sony and Dell. It employs one million workers in China. The plant in Wuhan mainly produces Xbox 360s.

During 2010, there were 18 suicide attempts over unbearable military-style discipline at Foxconn, in which 14 young workers jumped to their deaths from factory buildings. Amid outrage within China and internationally, Foxconn installed safety nets in some factory dormitories and promised to increase poverty-level wages for workers.

None of the supposed improvements has materialised. Instead, the company has moving to inland cities like Wuhan, where labour is cheaper. It is also preparing a program to replace a large number of workers with one million robots. Last May, an explosion in a Chengdu factory making iPads killed three workers, due to poor ventilation in the polishing department.

The latest protests erupted after managers at the Wuhan plant decided to move 600 workers to a new production line on January 2, making cases for the Taiwanese computer company Acer. An unnamed striker told the British *Telegraph* that they were put to work without any training and paid on a piecemeal basis. "The assembly line ran very fast and after just one morning we all had blisters and the skin on our hand was black. The factory was also really choked with dust and no one could bear it," the worker said.

Because workers could not cope with the conditions, they went on strike. "It was not about the money but because we felt we had no options," the worker explained. About 100 workers initiated a demand for pay rises, but the management issued an ultimatum, demanding that employees either return to work or quit, with one month's pay for each year of service.

Another worker told the *New York Times* that some employees were originally based in coastal city of Shenzhen, but had been forced to move to Wuhan with a promised wage of $450 a month. Instead, they received one third less than that, with much worse working conditions.

After most workers took the option to quit, the management withdrew the compensation offer, forcing workers to take desperate action. About 300 workers returned to the factory to stage a protest, with many threatening to jump off the factory roof. It forced Wuhan mayor Tang Liangzhi and other officials to intervene to talk them down on January 3.

Amid renewed international concern over suicide attempts at Foxconn, Microsoft, the owner of the Xbox 360 brand, issued a statement, claiming to be "committed to the fair treatment and safety of workers employed by our vendors, and to ensuring conformance with Microsoft policy." In 2010, amid the suicides at Foxconn, Microsoft made similar toothless comments, while defending Foxconn as "a responsible company."

Major Western corporations like Microsoft and Apple depend on the ruthless exploitation of Chinese workers in sweatshops like Foxconn's. With surging sales of iPads and iPhones, Apple's operating profit rate has risen to 30 percent in recent years—compared to just 1.25 percent for Foxconn. In the first half of 2011, Foxconn recorded a net loss of $17.65 million, whereas Apple surpassed Exxon Mobil as the world's largest

corporation based on market capitalisation.

The latest protests at Foxconn are part of a growing number of strikes by Chinese workers that began with stoppages at shoe and electronics plants in Guangdong province last November. The growing labour unrest is driven by the response of employers to deteriorating export prospects, an unraveling real estate bubble, and the tightening of credit for small and medium enterprises, all produced by intensifying global economic turmoil.

More strikes have developed in the past fortnight, according to the Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*. In Sichuan province, 10,000 Chengdu Steel workers struck over low wages and blocked a main highway for three days from January 4, repeatedly clashing with riot police, who used tear gas to dispel the strikers (see: "Strikes erupt in China's Sichuan province").

On January 5, more than 1,000 workers at a former state-owned Daxue Beer plant in the northeastern city of Dalian stopped work over poor wages and conditions, after the firm was taken over by Belgian brewery giant AB InBev. All five departments were closed as workers staged a sit-in for days.

At a Hong Kong-owned toy factory in Wuzhou city, in the south-western province of Guangxi, 1,300 workers walked out on January 7 over unpaid wages. Police were deployed to prevent workers from taking to the streets.

Thousands of workers at a Taiwanese-owned plant making computer cables in Guangdong's Dongguan city staged a stop work after they discovered a mouse in the New Year banquet. The incident triggered pent-up anger over the poor quality of the factory food. A senior worker told the *Yangcheng Evening Post* that since the kitchen had been outsourced to private operators last year, cockroaches, mice and sand had been found in meals. The protest only ended after executives promised to dine with the workers every day.

The concerted attacks by major companies on the already appalling wages, conditions and jobs of workers represent a shift from 2010, when strikes initiated by Honda auto workers and a public uproar over the Foxconn suicides resulted in concessions in the form of higher wages. Today, employers can no longer afford such concessions.

The suicide threats by the Foxconn workers indicate that a layer of workers believe they have nothing to lose. This is a sure sign that class tensions are reaching a boiling point.

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