

China: Two hundred Foxconn workers threaten suicide

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12 May 2012

Two months after the release of a report by the US-based Fair Labor Association (FLA) into working conditions at Foxconn plants in China, 200 company employees threatened suicide at its Wuhan facility.

The workers walked off the job on April 27, climbed onto the factory roof and threatened to jump in the second collective suicide threat over wages and conditions at the plant since January. The facility mainly produces Xbox 360s—one of Microsoft’s most profitable products.

According to Hong Kong’s *MingPao Daily*, the protesting workers had been transferred from other plants in Shenzhen and Yangtai only to have their output increased with longer hours, and less pay. After management ignored their repeated complaints, the workers decided to stage the strike on April 27. Police and the fire department were sent to the scene before workers were persuaded to end their protest.

Foxconn witnessed two other strikes in China last month. A smaller rooftop protest occurred in Shenzhen on April 11 involving several dozen workers opposed to their transfer to another city, Huizhou. On April 13, 2,000 employees at Taiyuan plant went on strike to protest unfair remuneration, prompting a large-scale police intervention. The plant is contracted to produce 57 million iPhones this year for the American corporate giant Apple. (Click here to see striking workers walking out.)

Last month Foxconn—which produces 40 percent of the world’s electronics goods and employs 1.2 million workers in China—reached an agreement with Apple to improve working conditions at its plants. It followed

the release of a Fair Labor Association (FLA) report in March, which detailed some of the widespread exploitation and labour abuses at Foxconn plants.

The FLA was established by the Clinton administration in 1999 and aims to provide a fig leaf of “corporate social responsibility” to giant American corporations contracting out their production to cheap labour facilities internationally.

Apple joined the FLA in January, after a series of suicides by young Foxconn employees and growing numbers of deaths caused by dangerous working conditions in 2010. Apple’s move had little to do with improving labour conditions at Foxconn or its other suppliers but was an attempt to contain the damage to its image by the exposure of extreme labour exploitation.

Apple pays an estimated \$8 for the assembly of an iPhone 4S while selling the same device for \$600. Wages at one Foxconn plant start at \$285 a month.

The FLA report investigated three Foxconn facilities—at Gualan, Longhua, and Chengdu—surveying over 35,000 workers. It revealed that employees typically worked more than 60 hours per week and were not paid proper overtime. Earlier this year Foxconn claimed that its employees were limited to “no more than” 60 hours per week.

At Gualan, 80 percent of employees worked over 60 hours a week between September 2011 and January 2012. In Longhua, 77.1 percent worked over 60 hours a week between March 2011 and February 2012. Many employees also laboured 11 or more consecutive days.

Two-thirds of Foxconn employees interviewed by FLA investigators said that their wages were insufficient to pay for their basic needs, including healthcare and education. Workers also stated that the exploitation was so intense that they were in pain at the end of each day. Another major safety concern was aluminium dust, which caused an explosion last year in a Chengdu plant, killing several employees. FLA president and chief executive Aret van Heerden told the media that there was a “lingering sense among workers that they’re in a dangerous place.”

The FLA also found that the unions in Foxconn mainly consisted of management representatives and that most workers were not even aware of the existence of these “unions”. This directly violates China’s toothless Trade Union Law, which formally bans management personnel from holding leadership positions in unions.

Earlier this year, Apple released its own supplier audit, admitting to many of the same issues detailed in the FLA report. In March Apple CEO Tim Cook toured several Foxconn’s factories in a publicity relations exercise aimed at demonstrating that the world’s top corporation was not indifferent to the workers who manufacture its products. Cook was joined by senior Chinese leaders whose regime enforces the super-exploitation. Vice Premier Li Keqiang “urged” Apple and other transnational corporations to pay more attention to “caring” for Chinese workers.

Foxconn simply ignores such appeals. In 2010, fourteen workers jumped to their deaths. Foxconn responded by promising to raise its poverty-level wages but instead moved jobs to cities like Wuhan where wages are cheaper.

While the FLA report reveals some of the brutal working conditions at Foxconn facilities it only devotes four paragraphs to the situation facing tens of thousands of students who are employed as “interns”.

According to Hong Kong-based Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour, students as young as 16 have been forced into Foxconn’s plants

through a triangle partnership between the company, Chinese authorities and vocational schools. Students who refuse to comply, including those studying unrelated vocations, are told they cannot graduate unless they become Foxconn interns.

In order to meet increased demand, some students are forced to work between three and six months, often for 60-hour weeks, seven days a week. During the summer of 2010, for instance, 100,000 students from Henan were employed at Foxconn’s largest plant in Shenzhen. While the FLA report claims that Foxconn provides interns with health insurance for work-related injuries, the students have no official protection under existing Chinese labour laws.

The FLA investigation and various other “labour” reports—produced or sponsored by Apple and other Western corporations—on China’s vast sweatshop supply chains will do nothing to change the low pay and harsh working conditions confronting workers and youth at Foxconn and other companies. The exploitation is intensifying amid sharpening global competition between corporations such as Apple, Sony and Microsoft for markets in Europe and America where overall consumer spending has been severely reduced.



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