China’s Foxconn rocked by more labour unrest

John Chan
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Thousands of Foxconn factory workers in China’s Zhengzhou city reportedly went on strike last Friday after Apple Corporation intensified pressure for higher output and stricter quality standards for its new iPhone model.

The Zhengzhou plant, in China’s north-central Henan Province, has nearly 200,000 workers producing 200,000 phones daily. The US-based *China Labour Watch* reported on the strike based on accounts provided by workers involved. Some 3,000 to 4,000 production workers, mostly from the onsite quality control (OQC) line, took part. Several iPhone 5 production lines in the complex were also reportedly stopped for the day.

Foxconn had demanded that its employees work during the Chinese National Day holiday week (October 1-8). The corporate giant also issued strict new demands on product quality, without providing the necessary training for workers. Apparently under pressure from Apple, Foxconn management insisted that workers meet precise standards following customer complaints about scratches on phone frames and back covers. Apple is also struggling to meet the high demand for its new phone.

These demands only exacerbated already unbearable sweatshop conditions. The Zhengzhou plant has been making the new iPhone since the beginning of July, forcing workers to work over 20 hours of overtime per week, with some workers having just two or three days off each month.

China Labour Watch explained: “This ultimately put a tremendous amount of pressure on workers. Additionally, quality control inspectors fell into conflicts with workers and were beat up [sic] multiple times by workers. Factory management turned a deaf ear to complaints about these conflicts and took no corrective measures. The result of both of these circumstances was a widespread work stoppage on the factory floor among workers and inspectors.”

The report explained that in the week leading up to the strike, tensions had been rising over the new quality control demands. There were at least three incidents involving threats or actual physical violence directed against quality control inspectors.

Foxconn has attempted to cover up the issue, issuing a statement on Saturday denying there had been a strike or any production stoppages in its Zhengzhou plant. The company only admitted that there had been some “quarrels” on October 1-2, which were “immediately addressed and measures taken, including providing additional staff for the lines in question”. It emphasised that “production has continued on schedule” on the new model iPhone.

Foxconn’s denial was contradicted by a report issued by Xinhua, China’s official news agency, which cited a government spokesman in Zhengzhou who said that production lines had been halted when workers “persuaded” the inspectors to suspend work.

Foxconn Technology, the world’s largest outsourcing electronics manufacturer, has been rocked by recent labour unrest, including a violent clash last month between thousands of protesting workers and security guards and police in its Taiyuan plant (see: “Thousands of Foxconn workers clash with security guards in China

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The massive Zhengzhou factory was opened in 2010 as part of Foxconn’s move to shift production to China’s inland provinces, where labour costs are cheaper.

The company’s public promises to boost workers’ wages and improve conditions, issued after a spate of suicides widely reported in the international media two years ago, have proved nothing but a fraud. One worker at the Zhengzhou plant told *China Labour Watch* last month that wages “are actually decreasing”. In August, the Zhengzhou factory raised base pay for new workers to 1,800 yuan ($284) a month and for experienced workers to 2,000 yuan, but the actual wage is dependent on overtime hours worked and deductions made by management. Average monthly deductions include 420 yuan for meals, 110 yuan for accommodation, and 180 yuan for social insurance.

The Zhengzhou worker told *China Labour Watch* that his team of 87 workers used to assemble 3,000 handsets per day, but the rate for the new iPhone was increased to 6,500 per day. “We workers have to complete the work load of what before was 11 hours (or sometimes up to 14 hours) in only 10 hours,” he explained.

In a tragic incident related to the production of the new iPhone, a worker at Dongguan city’s Fugang Electronic committed suicide on September 29. Fugang Electronic is owned by Gou Tai-chiang, the younger brother of Foxconn’s billionaire president Terry Gou, and works with Foxconn making parts for international corporations, including data cables for the iPhone 5.

Last month one of the 10,000 workers at the Fugang Electronic plant in Dongguan, 32-year-old He Cheng, applied to take leave for one day to spend time with his sister, who was coming home for a visit from Taiwan. He Cheng had worked 13-14 hour shifts for 20 consecutive days without a break—but management denied his leave request. Cheng took the time off anyway, but when he returned to the plant he was told that he had lost his job and would not be given his wages for that month. The distraught worker then jumped out of one of the plant’s fifth floor windows and was killed instantly.

Last Friday, some twenty of He Cheng’s relatives staged a demonstration outside the factory, holding a banner denouncing it as a sweatshop. According to a report in the Hong Kong *Ming Pao Daily*, several thousand workers coming off the night shift and beginning the morning shift rallied around the family in support. They also voiced anger over the terrible conditions they endure, including excessive work hours and low quality food. Last month, more than 200 workers suffered from food poisoning at the factory. Several of the victim’s family members were arrested.

Social and industrial tensions are rising throughout China as its industrial expansion slows. The export-dependent Chinese economy has been hit hard by the slump in its European and American markets and demands by major international corporations like Apple for lower production costs. The drive for corporate profit is now threatening to ignite a wider social explosion.

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