

Foxconn strikes and the global class struggle

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Protests and strikes by thousands of Chinese workers against the oppressive conditions in the huge sweatshops operated by the world's largest electronics manufacturer, Foxconn, have raised important issues for the international working class.

In recent decades, to justify the monstrous growth of financial parasitism in the West, bourgeois economists have repeatedly proclaimed that, with the rise of "the information economy," the creation of value is no longer dependent on the actual production process. As a result, they declare, the fundamentals of Marxism, in particular the revolutionary role of the working class as the bearer of the modern productive forces and a higher form of economic organisation—that is socialism—are "outdated." Apple, now the world's largest company by stock market valuation (\$US600 billion), is offered as "proof," as it appears to make huge profits without operating any manufacturing facilities.

The labour unrest in Foxconn, which manufactures Apple's iPhone5, among many other items, has effectively debunked this myth. Corporations like Apple are able to amass profit only by sitting at the apex of a vast global food chain for extracting surplus value from the working class. At the bottom are ruthless cheap-labour manufacturers like Foxconn, which employs some 1.1 million workers in China alone. Its giant factories, such as the one at Zhengzhou, which houses nearly 200,000 workers, make the latest electronics goods. The very existence of Foxconn graphically confirms the validity of the classical Marxist theory that surplus value and thus profit derives from the labour of the working class. The eruption of workers' protests at Foxconn foreshadows the emergence of revolutionary struggles of the working class in China as part of a growing movement internationally.

The latest strike on Friday at Foxconn's Zhengzhou complex was the product of the deepening global

economic breakdown. For Apple, its future depends on a successful launch of the iPhone5. Its exacting demands to increase production and quality are passed on to Foxconn workers in the form of long hours, harsh discipline and constant pressure for speed-up. Tensions boiled over last week after the imposition of new quality control procedures provoked arguments, threats and physical violence against the quality inspectors supervising the regime.

The unbearable conditions at Foxconn parallel those that fuelled the recent militant strikes by South African miners and Bangladeshi garment workers. These are part of the reemergence of the class struggle internationally that began with the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt last year. The ongoing mass protests and strikes in Europe, and the eruption of major working class struggles in America, such as the Chicago teachers' strike, have the same basic source—the attempt by the financial elites to impose the burden of the deepening global crisis onto the working class.

The austerity measures being imposed on workers in Europe, the US and Japan, who are the largest consumers of Chinese goods, have led to enormous economic hardship in China as exporters like Foxconn, operating on tiny profit margins, intensify the exploitation of their workforces. In fierce competition over shrinking markets, transnational corporations now regard Chinese wages as too high. Foxconn, which moved from coastal to inland China in search of cheaper labour, is moving production to South East Asian countries like Indonesia, where the average wage is one third of China's. In turn, these conditions set the new benchmark for the wages and conditions of workers not only in China, but throughout the world, including the West.

The only means of ending this system of intensifying exploitation is through the international unification of the working class in the fight for socialism—to place the

means of production, which are global in nature, under the democratic control of working people. The overthrow of the sweatshop system in China is inextricably bound up with the struggles of American workers to end the dominance of the Wall Street financial oligarchy that sits at the summit of the global system of capitalist exploitation.

Within China, the working class cannot defend its rights except through a political struggle to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy, which actively courts the corporate giants like Foxconn and Apple and ruthlessly suppresses any resistance by workers to the unbearable conditions they face. The evolution of the CCP into the vital partner of international capital is a powerful confirmation of the warnings made by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, about capitalist restoration in China.

Just over three decades ago, Deng Xiaoping hoped to resolve the economic crisis produced by the reactionary Stalinist theory of “Socialism in One Country” by openly reintegrating China back into the world capitalist system. That project has reproduced all the explosive economic and social contradictions that once propelled the grandparents of millions of Chinese workers in the early decades of 20th century into some of the stormiest class struggles in modern history in order to overthrow imperialist exploitation.

As Chinese workers come into struggle, they are well aware that the state-run unions—the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)—defend the interests of management and the government. But various labour activists have come forward to hoodwink workers into believing that their class interests can be defended by building “independent unions” or reforming the existing ACFTU in order to carry out collective bargaining with employers or pressure the CCP for concessions.

The dangers of this trade unionist perspective have been graphically exposed in South Africa, where the Congress of the South African Trade Unions and the National Miners Union were hailed for decades as proof that unions were a viable alternative for the working class. These are the same unions that collaborated with the African National Congress government and the giant mining corporations in the killing of 34 striking platinum miners in August. These

organisations, along with the ANC, have become the oppressors of South African workers, and preside over one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Chinese workers at Foxconn and other sweatshops can defend their class interests only through an independent political struggle against the CCP regime and a turn to workers in the advanced capitalist countries and around the world. Above all, what is required is the building of a revolutionary party based on a global socialist perspective and the strategic lessons of the international working class in the 20th century, especially the Fourth International’s protracted struggle against Stalinism. This means the construction of a Chinese section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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