

Another undercover report of super-exploitation in China's iPhone factories

Robert Campion
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A New York University (NYU) graduate recently reported his experiences working undercover at one of China's largest Apple iPhone factories, owned by Pegatron, in Shanghai. His experiences highlight the oppressive and poor working conditions in China, which remains a cheap labour platform for global capitalism.

Dejian Zeng undertook his trip in pursuit of a Master of Public Administration in 2016, in partnership with China Labor Watch (CLW), a New York-based organization. CLW and the BBC have previously exposed super-exploitation, including excessive and illegal overtime work, at Pegatron Shanghai, which currently employs around 60,000 workers.

Zeng related his experiences on the assembly line in an interview on the *Business Insider* web site.

"One line might have about a hundred stations," Zeng said, "each station does one specific thing ... What I did is that I put the sticker on the case and I put a screw on it ... It's like, that's the work. I mean it's simple, but that's the work that you do. Over, over, over again. For whole days."

Zeng repeated this particular task 1,800 times a day, to the point where he could perform the task blindfolded. He regularly worked 10.5-hour days, 6 days a week. Factoring in unpaid break times and security clearances, this amounted to 12.5 hours a day spent at the factory.

Zeng reported that it was usual for managers to yell at workers and keep them working at full capacity. Many workers became fatigued with the prolonged intensity of their tasks and struggled to catch sleep in the breaks.

"Sleep is really a thing in the factory. You can see that in the lounge; we have a lot of like long sofas but it's not really very comfortable ... It's like you can feel the iron."

"People just sit there and sleep. But you can't lay down. There are people walking around. If they see you lay down they will swipe the ID and take a record on it. And they put the record in your profile. And then they will publish it to your whole assembly line. So your manager would come and yell at you later. Sometimes if it happens multiple times they deduct money."

After finishing their shifts, Zeng and his co-workers returned to 8-bed dormitories, with little energy or time left for leisure, or access to culture.

"The time left in your life is very, very limited. It's just a couple of hours. And then there's not much you can do ... you really need to go to bed. And then the other day you wake up at 6:30. Again. And that's just a routine."

Zeng noted that a fellow employee worked 11 days straight.

In 2010, the world was shocked by reports of 14 suicides at iPhone factories operated by Foxconn, prompting Apple to introduce a minimal set of standards and marginally improve worker's pay and conditions. Pegatron emerged as one of Apple's principal manufacturing suppliers in the aftermath, taking advantage of its ability to better exploit its workforce.

As Zeng's experiences testify, the oppressive conditions still persist, evidenced by the crude installation of suicide nets around buildings and inside stairwells, as well as bars around all windows. Toward the end of Zeng's employment in August, the *Wall Street Journal* would report the suicide of a Foxconn worker in Zhengzhou.

Pegatron and Foxconn are monolithic corporations based in Taiwan. They are able to operate on low margins by brutally exploiting workforces of hundreds of thousands. One facility operated by Foxconn in

Shenzhen is known as “Foxconn City.” The walled-off compound houses an industrial army of approximately 420,000, with a population density roughly five times that of the world’s most populous city, Mumbai.

In 2014 the Pegatron factory where Zeng was employed was profiled by the BBC, which found breaches of numerous of the standards supposedly put in place by Apple. These included excess overtime, bypassing the use of ID cards to record worker’s shifts, and exploitation of juvenile workers. One undercover reporter was required to work 18 days in a row, despite repeated calls for a day off.

Apple’s standards and appeals to its manufacturers to uphold them are cynical window-dressing. Details of the horrendous working conditions are also suppressed by the Beijing regime, which enforces police-state conditions on behalf of conglomerates such as Apple.

But the social tensions in China are increasingly erupting to the surface. The *China Labour Bulletin* recorded 2,663 strikes and protests in 2016, double the total of 2014. The real figures are likely to be higher.

According to CLW, workers’ pay was cut significantly in the eight months prior to Zeng’s employment, by eliminating bonuses, ending compensations for meals and sharing insurance payments with workers. As a result, despite Pegatron reporting an increase in wages, the hourly wage decreased from \$US1.85 in 2015 to \$1.60 in 2016.

Zeng spent six weeks at the factory, earning a monthly wage of 3,100 yuan (\$480). This paltry figure places out of workers’ reach the products of their own labour. His 200-person assembly line churned out 3,600 iPhones a day, but workers could not afford to buy them. Instead, they worked overtime out of economic necessity in order to support themselves and their families.

“Can they save two month’s wages to get an iPhone?” asked Zeng, “They won’t do that. The phones they generally use are Chinese productions like Oppo or something like that.

“The only thing that we’re thinking about is really money, money, money. I need to get some money for my family, I need to support my life, support my kids. That’s the only thing in their mind, sometimes they don’t even care how tired they are.”

One perverse measure of the extreme exploitation at play is the \$378 million “compensation” package

granted to Apple’s CEO Tim Cook upon employment—it is more than 65,000 times the annual salary of a Pegatron worker.



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