

Foxconn workers stage protest in Zhengzhou, China

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Hundreds of temporary Foxconn workers rallied last month in the streets of Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan province in central China, over the non-payment of wages by recruitment agencies. The protest began on December 12 and continued the following day before police violently suppressed it.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, the workers held placards declaring: “Illegal agents with Foxconn cheated migrant workers, give me back my money.” A video showed workers chanting: “We want our reward money.” Several protesters reported on line that police had beaten or detained them.

The Taiwanese-owned Foxconn, the world’s largest contract electronic manufacturer, produces for major global corporations such as Apple, Amazon, Intel and Microsoft, employing some 1.3 million workers in huge plants.

The Zhengzhou plant exclusively manufactures iPhones, accounting for half of total production. Its workforce swells to 350,000 at peak times when a new model is launched. It can churn out 500,000 phones a day, or 350 a minute. Workers are crammed into dormitories—eight to a room—in 10- or 12-storey buildings. The complex is known to residents as “iPhone City.”

Foxconn receives considerable backing from the Zhengzhou government, which not only financially helped build the plant and operate it, but is also involved in recruitment drives to provide workers, particularly during the peak periods. A *Business Insider* article last May reported that the local government enforced quotas for villages and towns to supply workers to Foxconn.

In response to last month’s protest, spokespersons for Apple and Foxconn declared that the matter would be looked into. The comments are entirely cynical. Both

Apple and its contract manufacturer are undoubtedly well aware of the unscrupulous practices used by labour recruiters to supply young workers for the huge plant. Offering bonuses is a common ploy.

A worker told the *South China Morning Post* she had been recruited by the Huajie agency, a casual labour supplier, in September to work in the Foxconn factory as a cellphone quality inspector. She worked from 8am to 8pm with a two-hour lunch break for a monthly wage of just 2,100 yuan (\$US307).

Workers recruited by the Huajie agency had been promised a bonus of \$US870 if they worked for 55 days. The worker told the newspaper that she had been working at Foxconn for more than 100 days but had received no bonus.

Professor Pun Ngai, from the University of Hong Kong, told the *South China Morning Post*: “Especially in recent years, when the economic environment hasn’t been that great, many companies including Foxconn, want to save costs so they use agencies to recruit workers. [But] some agencies have many local partners, and in my research, those partners are illegal and are not suitably qualified to arrange proper contracts for workers.”

Chinese labour laws limit the use of temporary workers to secondary, not primary, jobs, and their numbers to 15 percent of the total workforce. But, Pun declared, “many companies fail to meet these standards. Temporary workers are cheap, usually do not receive benefits such as social welfare, and are more flexible. When the company doesn’t need them, they can give them some money and send them off.”

There are a number of signs that Apple and Foxconn are preparing a major restructuring of iPhone manufacturing operations. Last month a Chinese court banned some Apple iPhone models for breaching the

patents of Qualcomm, a US telecommunication and electronic company. China, Hong Kong and Taiwan collectively form the third largest market for iPhones.

In November, Bloomberg reported that Foxconn planned to slash its costs by \$US2.9 billion and eliminate 10 percent of its non-technical staff. This led to large-scale layoffs in Foxconn plants and further strikes and protests.

Reuters reported on December 27 that Foxconn was considering shifting production of its high-end iPhone models to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Another report indicated that Foxconn might establish an iPhone plant in Vietnam.

Foxconn is infamous for its oppressive labour conditions, particularly after a series of suicides in 2010 by workers at its huge Longhua plant in Shenzhen received global publicity. Foxconn moved some production to other areas, including in Zhengzhou, one of China's most impoverished regions, where wages were even lower.

Conditions in the Zhengzhou plant are onerous. The *Business Insider* report in May included interviews with workers who explained that shifts were at least 10 hours long and, in many cases, involved monotonous, repetitive tasks, such as fitting a single screw in the back of the phone, or polishing the screen.

One worker, Chen, described the assembly line: "You do the same thing every day. It never ends. After a while you get annoyed at the thing that you are doing. You don't even notice it at first. Eventually, I felt annoyed to the core of my heart. Like I had no purpose." Unlike many others, Chen had no family to support and so could choose to leave.

Poverty-level basic wages compelled workers to work large amounts of overtime to make ends meet. Chinese law limits overtime to 36 hours a month, but the article indicated that in peak times Foxconn workers worked as much as 60 hours of overtime a week. That was equivalent to 14-hour days, 7 days a week.

The *Financial Times* reported in 2017 that Foxconn exploited student labour at its Zhengzhou factory. A longtime employee said Foxconn recruited many student workers, some just 16 years old, every year during busy periods in August and December. The students, who had to obtain "work experience" to graduate, were compelled to work overtime.

In January last year, a suicide was reported at the

Zhengzhou factory of a worker employed through a recruiting agency. Nothing had changed since the 2010 exposure of Foxconn's Shenzhen plant. The conditions remain oppressive and workers are often subject to public humiliation and physical punishment.



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