

# **Foxconn forced to close key Indian facility after worker protest over mass food poisoning**

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The Taiwanese conglomerate Foxconn, a major Apple Phone supplier, has been forced to close a flagship factory in India for the past week, after workers blocked a key interstate highway to protest the food poisoning of hundreds of their coworkers in a company-provided canteen.

At least 159 young female workers employed at Foxconn's plant in Sriperumbudur, on the outskirts of Chennai in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, were hospitalised for food poisoning Friday, Dec. 17. This was a result of their eating a contaminated meal from canteens attached to the company-provided hostels where workers live in conditions akin to those of 19th century indentured labourers.

The company and government authorities are trying to scapegoat the canteen workers who cook and serve the food at the hostels for the incident. Two have been arrested.

According to the Kanchipuram District administration, a further 256 workers were treated as out-patients for vomiting, diarrhoea and dizziness.

Over 1,000 female workers mounted a boisterous protest to voice their anger over the mass food poisoning. They complained that they have repeatedly raised objections to the horrid food they are being served. But whenever they do, Foxconn denies any responsibility and tells them to register their complaints with Tamil Nadu's DMK-led state government, whose Labour Department is notorious for its intimate ties to management.

According to news reports, the earliest the plant, which employs more than 5,000 workers, will resume production is this Sunday.

The plant shutdown was aimed not only at appeasing the outraged Foxconn workers. Both management and the DMK government feared the protests could spread

across the Sriperumbudur industrial belt, a major centre of auto production, as workers employed by other transnational companies and their suppliers face similar conditions.

The Sriperumbudur Foxconn facility manufactures iPhone 12 models for Apple and has started to make Apple's new, highly-promoted iPhone 13 models as well. In addition, the plant manufactures Amazon Fire TV sticks, Xiommi brand cell phones and other high tech items.

On the evening of Friday, December 17, Foxconn workers learned that hundreds of their colleagues were being treated for food poisoning after eating their evening meal at their hostel cafeteria. According to news reports, workers exchanged WhatsApp messages expressing concern over the fate of eight workers who had disappeared, fearing they could have died. When they approached management, it shrugged off their concerns, effectively trivializing the incident.

Following this, hundreds of Foxconn workers who had come to start their shift decided to block a major nearby highway. Beginning around 10 p.m. and continuing until it was broken up by police some 10 hours later, workers paralysed traffic on the highway that connects Chennai with Bengaluru, the capital of the neighbouring state of Karnataka. Making clear their anger over the brutal working conditions they endure and their hatred for the company, the protesting workers chanted "Down with Foxconn."

Numerous protesting workers were beaten by the police and thrown into police vans. The police reportedly detained 70 workers at a wedding hall. Twenty-two trade unionists were also arrested and charged with whipping up the protests.

The Kanchipuram District administration claimed that as of Monday, December 20, 158 of the 159

hospitalised workers had been discharged.

A former Foxconn worker named Durga Devi, who was interviewed in Tamil on YouTube, described the nightmarish conditions these workers face in their hostels—conditions that have only worsened during the pandemic—and the unhygienic food they are provided every day. Durga emphasized that the cooks and workers at the canteen are not to be blamed for the poor quality of the food they serve. Instead, she indicted the company management for skimping on food expenditure and cleaning.

Durga explained that student hostels that previously provided accommodation to college engineering students, but had been shut down for students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were leased by Foxconn to house its workers. These hostels are so far away from the plant that it takes workers about an hour and a half to travel to the plant by company bus every day. This means that workers spend three hours daily just traveling back and forth from work.

She described the crowded accommodation they endure: “The hostel rooms mostly don’t have windows and in these rooms 8 to 15 workers have to stay. For instance, when I was staying in the hostel, there were a total of 14 workers in my room.” When workers complained to the management that they don’t even have enough space to store their luggage in their allotted room, they were told to “adjust themselves” to what they have been provided.

Durga also complained that “we don’t even get proper sleep and the hostel is not maintained hygienically. We have to dine and sleep in the same place. It is unbearable.” She added, “It is impossible to maintain any kind of social distance in these crowded rooms to prevent the spread of pandemic.”

Reuters news organisation reported in May of this year that hundreds of workers got infected with COVID-19 at Foxconn’s Sriperumbudur factory, forcing the company to temporarily curtail production. As a result, production of the Apple iPhone 12 manufactured at the plant for the Indian market has slumped by over 50 percent. This has prompted Foxconn management to exert massive pressure upon workers to increase production, by increasing the intensity of work and compelling them to work longer hours.

Due to Washington’s ever-escalating offensive

against China, Foxconn and Apple are both anxious to shift production from China to India. India’s Narendra Modi-led government, which is closely aligned with the US in its anti-China offensive, is, for its part, anxious to transform India into an alternate production chain-hub to China. It lavished huge sums as well as tax and other concessions on Foxconn to convince it to site Apple cell phone manufacture at the Sriperumbudu plant.

The Tamil Nadu general secretary of the Stalinist Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM), K. Balakrishnan, condemned the police action against the Foxconn workers on the night of Dec. 17-18. This is completely hypocritical, as the CPM contested the 2021 state elections in a DMK-led electoral bloc, continues to work closely with this ethnic-chauvinist regional party and frequently extols it as a friend of the working class. On taking office in May of this year, the DMK government, with the support of the CPM and its sister Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), pressed forward with the “reopening” of the economy amid India’s devastating second wave of the pandemic.

So close are relations between the DMK and the two Stalinist parties, the latter funded their campaigns for India’s 2019 national elections almost entirely from a massive donation of Rs. 250 million (\$3.6 million) that the DMK made to them.



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