

COVID outbreak exposes oppressive conditions for Foxconn workers in China

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An outbreak of COVID-19 infections at the massive Foxconn campus at Zhengzhou in China's Henan province—the world's largest iPhone plant—has pointed to the repressive conditions enforced by the company in order to churn out phones for Apple.

Corporate media outlets internationally, agitating against China's zero-COVID policy, claimed to raise concerns about the treatment of workers at the facility when numbers of workers, worried about infection, decided to return home on foot.

Reuters, for example, claimed that the events at the complex had “come to symbolise worker discontent with harsh COVID curbs.”

At the same time, Foxconn's disregard for employees' health and living conditions during the outbreak sparked outrage on the internet in China and elsewhere.

The Zhengzhou complex, a virtual mini-city, exclusively manufactures iPhones, worth billions of dollars to Apple. Its workforce swells to 350,000 at peak times when a new model is launched. It can mass-produce 500,000 phones a day. For that purpose, lowly-paid workers are crammed into dormitories—eight to a room—in 10- or 12-storey buildings.

According to reports, Foxconn's infections began to emerge as early as October 8, but did not attract attention at that time. At first, the Taiwanese-owned company told the media there were no “symptomatic” infections and tried to mislead workers that no cases had occurred at the facility.

Foxconn said production and operations were “relatively stable,” and the three-month output from October to December would have “an unchanged outlook.”

According to some social media comments, government officials also covered up the infections. There is still no credible data on infections within Foxconn factories.

Instances of employees testing positive increased, but it

was not until October 14, when the factory suddenly began to implement “closed management”—ordering workers to remain inside the complex—that workers realised that the pandemic had spread.

As the number of cases continued to rise, close contacts had to be isolated in dormitories. The factory stopped dine-in meals from October 19, and instead distributed lunch boxes for workers to take back to the dormitories to eat.

Many workers reported that they received spoiled meals, and sometimes there were no lunch boxes, so they had to satisfy their hunger with bread and instant noodles. Several workers said the domestic waste was not disposed of and piled up at dormitory doors.

The chaotic management and poor environment created alarm among the workers, who saw fellow workers getting infected.

“All this information gives me the feeling that more and more people are infected, but Foxconn does not have enough manpower to deal with it,” one worker told *Lifeweek*, a Chinese business magazine. What he was afraid of, he said, was what would happen if the pandemic became “uncontrollable.”

The worker explained: “It may be hard for outsiders to imagine this sentiment, but for employees who knew nothing at the time, there are signs that our safety is difficult to guarantee.”

Growing unease led many workers to leave, mostly those from nearby areas. “This is not stable work, and it is not worth the risk of contracting the disease to continue to do it,” a worker said in an interview with *Caixin News*.

Another worker said Foxconn even had workers who had tested positive continuing to work, mixing with other workers.

Because some infected areas in Zhengzhou were also under lockdown, fleeing workers could not access public transport and had no choice but to return to their home locations on foot.

A day after videos of workers leaving the factory circulated, Foxconn and several local governments in Henan said they had arranged transport for workers who chose to go home.

Government announcements said workers returning to their hometowns must undergo centralised isolation. But some places required workers to pay for their isolation, and this caused further dissatisfaction.

Foxconn is notorious for its harsh labour conditions, particularly since 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 Zhengzhou, where wages were even lower.

The size of Foxconn's factories and its ability to standardise the production of large numbers of phones make it Apple's most important supplier, accounting for half its global supply. Foxconn is now in a critical manufacturing period ahead of the holiday season at the end of the year.

Apple reportedly lost about \$4 billion in iPad and Mac sales in the spring and summer after factories outside Shanghai closed to limit the spread of COVID-19.

In Zhengzhou, a city with a population of around 10 million, Foxconn has a dominating presence, facilitated by the local, provincial and national governments.

According to data released by the China Association for Foreign Economic Relations and Trade, in 2019 Zhengzhou Foxconn ranked first in China for exports, with a total value of \$US31.6 billion. Foxconn accounted for some 82 percent of Henan province's total import volume and 65 percent of its export volume.

On October 31, a Foxconn spokesperson said no serious infections had occurred in the facility and spoke about ensuring continued production, while claiming the company's top priority was the safety of employees.

Likewise, Apple says the company is working closely with suppliers to restore normal production levels, while it "ensures the health and safety of workers."

However, Apple announced on November 7 that due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, production at Zhengzhou had been greatly reduced. That triggered warnings on Wall Street that Apple may not have enough iPhones to meet demand this year, which could severely impact the company's bottom line.

"[T]his latest zero-COVID situation is an absolute gut punch for Apple in its most important holiday quarter," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives wrote in an investor note. These pressures from the financial markets point to the colossal profit interests bound up with the global media

campaign to denounce China's zero-COVID policy and demand its reversal.

After the Foxconn outbreak became the focus of global media attention, the government response focused on cooperating with the company to resume production. Foxconn Technology Group chairman Liu Yangwei, said: "We will cooperate with the government and customers to return to normal production capacity in the shortest possible time."

Despite the risk of further infections, government authorities asked Henan vocational schools and colleges to mobilise students to enter the Foxconn factory and directed some villages and towns to assist Foxconn to recruit workers.

Each of China's recent outbreaks have largely been suppressed through the continuation of the zero-COVID policy, which includes lockdowns, rigorous contact tracing, isolation of infected individuals, mass testing and universal mask-wearing.

However, without a globally coordinated elimination strategy, infections will continue to be imported into the country to spread and threaten public health, and pressures will mount for China to end its policy.

Despite claiming to continue to adhere to a zero-COVID policy, the Chinese government issued 20 measures on November 10, including further reducing the isolation time of close contacts and cancelling the designation of secondary close contacts. If China were to drop its mitigation measures and pursue a vaccine- and treatment-only approach, as advocated relentlessly by the Western media, it would likely lead to the deaths of millions of people.

With the arrival of late autumn, COVID-19 has begun to spread in China. As of November 12, there were tens of thousands of infected people, including 12,175 local confirmed cases and 80,251 asymptomatic infections. Although the pandemic is still controllable, it is regarded as China's most serious pandemic wave in six months.



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