

Anger erupts among workers at Foxconn plant in Zhengzhou, China

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Protests involving thousands of workers erupted Tuesday night at the massive Foxconn factory at Zhengzhou that produces around half of the world's Apple iPhones. Details are scanty as news of the unrest mainly via social media has been subject to heavy official censorship.

Nevertheless, it appears that the workers clashed with large contingents of police as they protested over unpaid bonuses and poor working and living conditions. Workers also expressed concerns that they were being forced to work alongside and live in dormitories with others who were potentially infected with COVID-19.

In response to a COVID-19 outbreak in October, Foxconn initially sought to ignore the infections then imposed a so-called closed-loop system aimed at keeping production going. The entire workforce was confined to the plant and infected workers forced to remain in their dormitories.

Foxconn Zhengzhou is a mini-city that houses up to 350,000 workers at peak periods. At full capacity, the plant can produce 500,000 phones a day. Workers are crammed eight to a room into huge dormitory complexes, 10 or 12 storeys high.

Frustration over appalling conditions and fears of infection led to a mass exodus from the plant in early November. Social media videos showed workers with their belongings leaving the factory on foot due to the lack of public transport after a COVID-19 outbreak in Zhengzhou city.

Under pressure from Apple to boost production of the new iPhone 14 model in time for the Christmas shopping season in the US and internationally, Foxconn in league with local government launched a mass recruitment campaign with promises of pay and bonuses to hire 100,000 new workers.

This week's protests apparently centred among new recruits, angry that the promised pay and bonuses had not been received.

A report by the Reuters news agency described the situation: "'Give us our pay!' chanted workers who were surrounded by people in full hazmat suits, some carrying batons, according to footage from one video. Other footage showed teargas being deployed and workers taking down quarantine barriers."

The *Gizmodo.com* website reported: "Dramatic videos capture the scene as thousands of workers stormed the iPhone factory campus overnight, breaking through barricades and security checkpoints. Reports say protesters were beaten back by police and security forces who pummelled protesters with shields and batons and covered streets with tear gas.

"Videos show protesters fighting police and security personnel, most of the latter dressed up in white head-to-toe white hazmat suits. Other videos show protesters pushing past barricades in a large wave, and more posted online show protesters destroying security checkpoints at the iPhone factory."

The workers directly involved in the clashes clearly had broad sympathy from other workers. According to Bloomberg, social media videos showed "those watching the protests from the sidelines or from balconies above the chaos also shouted 'fight, fight.'"

The BBC reported one Foxconn worker as saying: "They changed the contract so that we could not get the subsidy as they had promised. They quarantine us but don't provide food. If they do not address our needs, we will keep fighting." He said that he had seen a man "severely injured" after a beating from police.

Citing two former Foxconn Zhengzhou workers, who have maintained close contact with workers inside the plant, the *South China Morning Post* explained the

workers had stormed out of their dormitories on Tuesday evening over the company's failure to honour recruitment promises.

A former worker told the newspaper that the terms of a 'retention allowance', which had been promised to new employees who stay at the plant until February 15, 2023, had been changed. Workers now needed to stay until March 15 to receive the bonus—an extra month.

The anger was not just over pay and bonuses.

It is worth noting that several reports in the Western media, including the BBC, the *Guardian* and Reuters, deliberately muddy the waters by falsely implying that workers were protesting measures to suppress COVID-19 infections. In fact, the direct opposite is the case—workers make clear in their social media posts that they were concerned that not enough was being done to prevent the spread of the virus.

The What's on Weibo website that monitors Chinese language social media cited a lengthy post which explained that other promises had been broken. "Foxconn originally promised that new workers and original workers would live separately, but in reality they all live in the dorm buildings; and the old employees haven't done nucleic acid testing for 7-8 days, which means that there are positive Covid cases living and working together with new employees. This caused panic among the new workers, who feel cheated. That was the first deception.

"The second deception is that tonight everybody received a new contract from Foxconn, regardless if they were new employees who had already entered the Foxconn campus or employees who were still in quarantine, and the contract was totally different from the one issued by Foxconn at the time of recruitment. Everyone felt that Foxconn has deceived from the start and tricked them, which led to the outburst of riots today."

The website cited other social media posts. "We are not asking for anything, just regular nucleic acid testing and food delivery would do," one female worker said in a video that circulated on Kuaishou, a Chinese-language social video app.

"Foxconn is trash, they're garbage, they've used military force to suppress the workers, many staff members got injured, and the Zhengzhou government is colluding with them in bullying ordinary workers," one Weibo commenter wrote.

Foxconn has issued a statement denying that they made false promises and claiming that they were fulfilling their contractual obligations, without answering any of the complaints over alleged contractual changes.

It also claimed that it was "patently untrue" that new recruits had to share dormitories with workers who were COVID-positive, but did not answer allegations about the lack of PCR testing. The company simply declared that the dormitories had undergone standard procedures for disinfection and passed government checks.

After the police suppressed the protest yesterday, Foxconn reportedly sought to defuse the situation. Many new workers had been demanding to leave with compensation. The company apparently promised a payout of 10,000 RMB (\$US1,400) for anyone who chose to leave, but according to several social media posts later withdrew the offer.

The eruption of protests at the Foxconn Zhengzhou plant clearly reflects far broader social tensions in China being fuelled by the slowing economy, rising unemployment and the vast social gulf between the country's super-rich oligarchs and the vast majority of the population.

The What's on Weibo website reported that a clear majority of the people speaking out on social media support the Foxconn workers. It explained: "They post old propaganda posters that emphasize how the Chinese working class will lead the revolution, and recommend other Weibo users to read Karl Marx."

The website cited further comments pointing to broad discontent that is building up despite the Chinese Communist Party regime's efforts to suppress unrest.

"I feel so distressed about this," one Weibo commenter said about the Foxconn situation: "It's time to wake up!" "What's the first sentence of the national anthem?" one blogger wrote: "Stand up, those who refuse to be slaves!"



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