

Blood on your Apple?

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A report by the Fair Labor Association into working conditions at three plants in China that supply Apple with iPads and iPhones has confirmed gross violations of Chinese labour law and unacceptable management practices.

The plants are owned by the Taiwan corporation Foxconn and Apple finally agreed to call in the FLA after two well-documented reports publicised by the Hong Kong-based campaign group SACOM revealed the conditions which had driven 15 workers to suicide.

The FLA report found unsafe working conditions, with 43% of workers having witnessed accidents at work. Excessive overtime meant that 46% of workers worked more than 70 hours a week, although the legal limit is 49. Between November and January, 33% of workers had not even had their statutory entitlement of at least one day off per week! Worse still, overtime is paid in 30 minute increments and workers are often told to stop just before completion of an increment.

A particular concern raised by earlier reports was the misuse of ?internships? in which young students are ?given? work placements in Foxconn, often with the collusion of local government and education institutions. The students were found to be working the same shifts as other workers, including nights, in a flagrant breach of legal limitations.

Despite these revelations, and Apple's assurances that it will ensure implementation of all the report's recommendations, there are still grounds for serious concern about the real conditions in Foxconn's plants. As SACOM has pointed out, Apple provides financial support to the FLA and this immediately puts in question its impartiality. Although the FLA described its inspection as a ?full body scan? lasting one month, which sounds impressive, it actually only covered three plants, employing 178,000 workers. Foxconn has plants all over China and employs some 1.2 million in all.

Moreover, Foxconn had advance warning of visits and ample opportunity to prepare both the plants and the workers to present as good an impression as possible. By contrast, a third report by an international team of university researchers, soon to be published by SACOM, was based on 14 plants over 18 months during which some researchers worked at the plants and lived with the workers. This found not only widespread breaches of labour law, collusion between Foxconn and local authorities and dangerous working conditions but also far more extensive use of student workers and the effective elimination of a well-publicised wage increase through increased deductions and higher production targets. There have also been more suicides.

In March, Apple announced that it was to pay a dividend to shareholders for the first time since 1995 in order to bring its cash reserves of \$97.6 billion down to \$87.6 billion. That mountain of past profits is a direct measure of the exploitation of the Chinese labour force that make its products. No amount of slick publicity and expressions of concern for workers' welfare can obscure the reality that Apple relies on the

systematic mistreatment of the workforce.

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