

China's sweatshops exploit students

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The brutal reality behind the much-hyped release of Apple's new iPhone 5 was exposed last week when several thousand Foxconn workers in the Chinese city of Taiyuan clashed with security guards and police. The incident was apparently sparked by the aggressive behaviour of guards, but it gave vent to far broader frustration over wages and conditions.

Major corporations like Foxconn engage in large-scale exploitation of students as cheap labour, with the support of Chinese authorities at every level. While the practice is justified as a form of vocational education, students spend long hours in regimented conditions carrying out routine, repetitive tasks.

The Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao Daily* on September 6 highlighted the fact that a number of colleges and universities in Huai'an City in Anhui Province have required students to undergo a two-month "internship" with Foxconn's Fuyu Electronic Technology (Huai'an) Co. Ltd. The internship is part of student assessment and anyone who does not participate will not receive a diploma.

Ming Pao Daily reported that when students returned at the beginning of September, they were told that rather than seeking their own internships individually, they would be collectively allocated to major enterprises, mainly in Foxconn. Some institutes dispatched as many as 2,500 students to Foxconn's factories. Education officials bluntly told students: "Quite simply, it is to serve for the Foxconn production of Apple handsets."

A longstanding Foxconn employee told the newspaper that the company received large iPhone 5 orders after many people had left their jobs at the end of summer holidays, causing a labour shortage. Low-cost student workers were used to fill the gap in the lead up to September 12, the date for the release of Apple's new phone.

The *Nanfang People Weekly* conducted its own investigation in September into student labour at the same factory. Yu Lu, a young woman in her third year at the Jiangsu Financial, Vocational and Technical College, was forced into her second "internship" at Foxconn since last year. She works on the production line making Apple's data cables—a task that involves simple operations that "even primary school students can do, and has nothing to do with professional skills."

Yu explained that the work is hard, with a break of only 10 minutes in the morning. In their contract, Foxconn agreed to limit the working day to eight hours. In fact, students have to work 2-3 hours of overtime each day. Apart from an hour's lunch break, they work continuously from 8 a.m. to 9.30 p.m. Sometimes students are required to do a 12-hour nightshift until the next day morning.

Yu explained that discipline was harsh on the production line, where the supervisors were very abusive and aggressive. “During the work hours, if you want to go to toilet, you must pay attention to his [the supervisor’s] face. If you have a bad supervisor, even going to toilet is not allowed,” Yu said.

Students were paid only 1,320 yuan (\$210) a month last year, before a deduction of 110 yuan for accommodation and 4.5 yuan for each meal. There were 10 people to a dormitory room, Yu said, which was very crowded and poorly ventilated. She had often heard young women crying over the phone, complaining to their parents that the conditions were unbearable. All levels of the dormitories, from the second up, have nets to prevent workers committing suicide, as happened in 2010 when 14 jumped to their death at Foxconn factories.

Foxconn is not alone in exploiting student labour. A recent *China Labor Watch* investigation found that the electronics giant Samsung uses students extensively. At a Samsung plant in Huizhou, Hager Guoli Ltd., 60 to 80 percent of the 2,000-strong workforce were students. The company was in “partnership” with local high schools and technical colleges not only in Guangdong province, but as far afield as Chongqing and Guizhou. The factory makes phone handsets, DVD and MP3 players, and stereos for export, mainly to the US and Europe as well as the Middle East. It also supplies other international giants like Motorola and LG.

Some of the workers were under China’s legal working age of 16. There were at least a dozen child labourers doing the work of an adult—11 hours a day, 26-28 days a month—and getting just 70 percent of adult pay. Wu Xiaofang, a 14-year-old girl, was recently injured on her way to work from the dormitory. She fell on the stairs and could not work, but the company refused to take her to hospital or approve sick leave. Instead she lost six days pay.

All levels of government are responsible for this exploitation. In 2006, the Education Ministry made a number of recommendations “to comprehensively improve the quality of vocational education teaching.” Vocational colleges had to vigorously “combine learning with industry”—in essence, giving corporations access to “state accredited” student labour.

Government and business have formed a cosy financial relationship. Local governments provide student workers to help businesses reduce their payroll costs. In return, governments can cut education spending as the schools receive some finance from Foxconn and other corporations as “kickbacks” and “introduction fees” for supplying students. In Huai’an, for instance, Foxconn pays 500 yuan to the school for every student sent, while the government gives another 100 yuan.

The plight of these students is just one expression of the brutal exploitation of the working class as a whole by international giants such as Apple and Samsung through their contract manufacturers such as Foxconn. The accelerating economic crisis and slowdown in consumer spending in the US and Europe is intensifying the competitive pressures faced by Chinese manufacturers, triggering even greater exploitation of sweatshop labour in order to maintain corporate profit rates.

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