

iSlave



Jenny Chan explores life and death at one of China's most successful companies.

While getting ready to start work on the production lines, management ask: 'How are you?' Workers must respond by shouting: 'Good! Very good! Very, very good!'

SOME ISSUES:

What do you think about the working conditions described here?

Should this be legal?

Do companies have a responsibility to make sure their goods are produced in a decent environment for workers?

What about consumers? Do they have a responsibility?

Would this affect what products you buy?

Last year a startling 18 Chinese migrant workers attempted suicide at Foxconn production facilities located in Guangdong, Jiangsu and Hebei Provinces. Fourteen died, while four survived with critical injuries. All were between 17 and 25 years old. Why did they, in the prime of youth, give up on their lives?

In 2010, Foxconn recorded all-time high annual revenues of \$79.1 billion – even higher than some of its corporate customers such as Microsoft, Nokia or Dell. Consumers around the globe face a dizzying array of choice in the latest electronics gadgets such as the iPhone 4, the iPod, and, forthcoming, the slimmer tablet computer iPad 2. These are all produced by the million-plus Foxconn workers in China alone. The company is projected to capture 50 per cent of the world market share in electronics manufacturing and service by mid-2011.

Foxconn grew out of the Taipei-based parent company Hon Hai in 1988. Its strategy was to invest in the lower-cost Shenzhen Special Economic Zone bordering Hong Kong, where local government provided cheap industrial land and tax exemptions. And it had a ready labour force: the 230 million 'peasant-workers' of China – flexible, cheap, perfect for just-in-time production.

According to Foxconn CEO Terry Gou, a leader must be 'a dictator for the common good'. Under his leadership, one enormous factory has constructed its own 'city within a city' in Shenzhen, southern China, where company managers and security officers retain supra-governmental control over workers.

Every factory building and dormitory has security checkpoints with guards standing by 24 hours. Assembly workers wear uniforms colour-coded by their department. When they were interviewed, they constantly stressed how the multilayered electronic

entry access system felt like a total loss of freedom.

While getting ready to start work on the production lines, management will ask the workers: 'How are you?' Workers must respond by shouting: 'Good! Very good! Very, very good!'

The management undertakes this drilling process to instil

forced to stand at attention to read aloud a statement of self-criticism. She must be loud enough to be heard. Our line leader would ask if the worker at the far end of the workshop could hear clearly the mistake she has made. Oftentimes girls feel like they are losing face. It's very embarrassing. Her tears drop. Her voice becomes very small.'

Anti-suicide nets are hung around outdoor stairways of dormitory buildings to prevent employees from jumping



Ma Zishan mourns his son Ma Xiangqian, the tenth protest suicide against draconian management at the South China firm. The suicides continue. Photo: Kin Cheung/AP/Press Association Images

discipline. Workers elaborated how they are scolded and punished when they talked on the line, failed to catch up with the high speed of work, or made mistakes in work procedures.

According to a woman working on the soldering line attaching speakers to MP3- and MP4-format digital audio players: 'After work, all of us – more than 100 persons – are made to stay behind. It happens whenever workers get punished. A girl is

Line leaders are also under pressure, and treat workers harshly to reach productivity targets. The bottom line for management is daily output, not workers' feelings. Branded electronic products are expensive and there is no margin for mistakes. A female worker interviewee was punished for forgetting to fix a screw in an iPhone. She was made to copy Terry Gou's quotes such as 'A harsh environment is a good thing' 300 times.

'I am just a speck of dust'

Workers told us that after a basic wage increase to 1,200 yuan per month (£113) in June 2010, an increase in production was scheduled. A member of a group of young workers responsible for processing cellphone casing testified: 'The production output was set at 5,120 pieces per day in the past but it had been raised by 20 per cent to 6,400 pieces per day. We were completely exhausted.'

'We cannot stop for a minute from work. We are even faster than the machines. During really busy times I don't even have time to eat or go to the bathroom'

Foxconn deploys time-and-motion studies, statistical control processes, and computerised engineering devices to test worker capacity. The target is to increase speed until worker capacity is maximised. According to one worker: 'We cannot stop for a minute from work. We are even faster than machines.' Another reported: 'During really busy times, I don't even have time to eat or go to the bathroom.'

Buyers of Foxconn products want their computers and iPhones fast. The company is moving towards 24-hour non-stop conveyor belts to meet global demand. This drive for productivity and quality means constant pressure on Foxconn workers. Posters on the workshop walls and between staircases read:

'Value efficiency every minute, every second;

Achieve goals unless the sun no longer rises;

The devil is in the details.'

Workers are organised into fixed seating or standing positions along production lines for a typical shift of 12 hours – of which four are overtime. The rotating day and night shift system takes away any feeling of freshness, accomplishment or initiative toward work. Typical worker comments to us were: 'The air conditioners are only here for the sake of the machinery' and 'I am just a speck of dust in the workshop.'

Total management

Most migrant workers live in factory-provided dormitories because they are unable to afford even a small apartment. For companies like Foxconn the dormitory labour system is cost-efficient, ensuring workers spend their off-hours just preparing for another round of production. Workers are provided with 'conveniences' like dormitories and canteens to incorporate the entire living space in factory management. Food and drink, sleep, even washing are all scheduled tasks like those on production lines. Workers with different jobs and even different shifts are mixed in the same dormitory. They frequently disrupt each others' rest. Random dormitory reassignments break up friendship networks, increasing isolation and loneliness.

Workers live with strangers, are not allowed to cook, and cannot receive friends or families overnight. Whether you are single or married, private space is limited to one's own bed behind a self-made curtain.

Suicide as protest

In the wake of the suicides, Foxconn has installed three million square metres of safety nets – the so-called 'nets with a loving heart'. The anti-suicide nets are hung around outdoor stairways of dormitory buildings to prevent employees from jumping. This has not, however, stopped the suicides. On 7 January this year, a 25-year-old university graduate worker jumped to her death at Foxconn's flagship plant in Shenzhen.

In China, the new market economy – driven by the state, transnational capital and the people themselves – is based on a radical redefinition of needs and desires. Rural migrants long for a life attuned to the times, and the city is where everything is happening. Some young workers, who were born in the 1980s or 1990s, have been in the city since their childhood and do not possess farming skills. The higher the younger migrant workers' aspiration, the more obvious the contrast to harsh reality. Through various forms of protest, of which suicide is the most desperate expression, they are trying to reclaim their rights and dignity.

Suicide must not become the only desperate means to resist social injustice. Concrete improvements should start at Foxconn but not end there. Without stronger social and legal protection of workers' rights and support from the government, it seems certain we will witness a growing roll-call of deaths. Western consumers of electronic gadgets must become active advocates of humane production standards.

The New Internationalist, April 2011

*Jenny Chan is an advisor at Hong Kong-based Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM).
www.sacom.hk*