



Chinese responses to Foxconn suicides

3 June 2010

Foxconn has been notorious amongst Chinese labor activists for years. Its enormous size, the strict discipline imposed on its employees and its cramped dormitories with 3-tiered bunk beds make it stand out from other Chinese IT factories – not to mention the fact that it is the biggest manufacturer of electronic and computer components in the world. But never has this Taiwanese corporate giant had to deal with a scandal as big as this. A spate of 12 suicide attempts in less than five months (nine successful) has thrown the international spotlight on Foxconn and the big-name brands that buy from it. A lot has been written in English already. So in this edition of CLNT, we will supplement the extensive English language coverage with three articles which convey some of the Chinese responses to the suicides.

The last time Foxconn was shamed widely in the international media was in June 2006, after British tabloid the Daily Mirror ran a story about workers' cramped living conditions, low pay and long working hours. Foxconn fanned the flames by launching an absurd defamation case against two Chinese journalists who followed up the story, demanding 30 million RMB (US\$3.7 million) in damages. In the end, Foxconn settled for a symbolic one RMB payment from the journalists.

Following all that, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) made a show of requiring that Foxconn set up an enterprise union at the end of 2006 <http://www.clntranslations.org/article/4/wal-mart>, but workers and activists later found that the union was virtually inactive, and the official positions were dominated by management.

The 2006 exposé generated nowhere near as much controversy as the recent suicides. Foxconn is quick to point out that 12 suicide attempts in five months is not statistically abnormal. According to some media outlets, China's Ministry of Health data from 2007 put the rate of suicide at 25 per 100,000 people over the course of that year – suggesting that 9 suicides out of a workforce in the order of 450,000 to 500,000 is actually lower than average (1).

But critics do not accept this defence – amongst other reasons, because Foxconn's workforce is so young (for the most part, aged between 18 and 24). Critics point to the stress caused by the long working hours, strict discipline and fast pace on the factory floor at Foxconn, and cramped living conditions in the factory dormitories. Observers have also argued that rural migrant workers' despair is linked to a generational identity crisis; few rural youth want to remain in countryside as farmers, but the barriers to settling and surviving long-term in the city are huge and many find their urban aspirations disappointed.

The suicides have ignited debate that reaches beyond Foxconn alone, about China's entire model of economic development, and the systematic exploitation of migrant factory workers. The government has also been criticised by some, for excluding rural migrants from welfare services such as health, housing and education.

Both Foxconn and its buyers have gone into damage control, and have unilaterally announced increases in workers wages. Foxconn has announced it will implement an average 20 percent pay rise for all employees (pre-empting a minimum wage increase due in July). And interestingly, rumour has it on English tech blogs that one of Foxconn's major buyers Apple has pledged to direct between 1 and 2 percent of its profits back to Foxconn workers in the form of a direct subsidy (a very unusual corporate social responsibility strategy that defies the normal relationship between buyers, suppliers and labor in a global supply chain).

A lot has been written about these events in English already, and we'll link to some additional reports in the notes below (see notes below). For this edition of CLNT, we have selected some Chinese articles to accompany the extensive the English language coverage.

One of the most interesting Chinese responses has been an open letter, written by nine prominent sociologists – including Pun Ngai from Hong Kong who has been a leading figure in the Chinese labor movement for years. It is very unusual for mainland Chinese academics to issue collective statements like this to advocate for marginalized social groups, and is a promising sign that we might see more academics take a vocal stand in support of workers. The letter explicitly argues for “an end to this model of development” and calls on the government to expand the urban welfare system, to provide health, housing and education for rural migrants. It employs a useful description of migrant workers, as being on a “path of no return”, unable or unwilling to return and re-integrate into rural society, but unable to achieve a decent standard of life in the city.

Click below to read the sociologists' letter:

Open Letter from 9 Sociologists: end the tragedy at Foxconn

http://www.clntranslations.org/file_download/110

9名社会学者发公开信：杜绝富士康悲剧

<http://tech.sina.com.cn/it/2010-05-19/13214206671.shtml>

Second is an opinion piece, printed in the widely-read Southern Metropolitan Daily. It lays the blame for the suicides squarely on factory management systems, like Foxconn's, that treat workers as “appendages of the production line” and not people. The author, an anonymous scholar from Beijing, argues that what destroyed these young people's lives was the lack of space in Foxconn's regimented factory compound to develop community bonds or support networks, and recommends that the dormitory system be abolished so as to allow migrant workers to have some kind of a life outside of the control of their employer.

Click below to download the opinion piece:

Foxconn, please let migrant workers live a full life

http://www.cntranslations.org/file_download/111

富士康，请让农民工完整地生存

<http://gcontent.nddaily.com/d/88/d8847be3f7cc1b14/Blog/879/b95251.html>

And the third pre-dates the rash of suicides this year. It is apparently the story of a Foxconn worker, which describes day-by-day, blow-by-blow what it was like for him/her to enter the company as a new worker. It highlights some aspects in which Foxconn is apparently better than some factories, for example, providing free dormitory accommodation and meals. But one key problem for this worker was exhaustion and a lack of personal space. Judging by the minimum wage level referred to in the piece, the events took place around 2007. The story was posted in 2009, along with several other articles under the title Foxconn Investigative Report.

Click below to download the worker's account here:

I am a Foxconn Worker

http://www.cntranslations.org/file_download/112

我在富士康当工人

<http://zggr.cn/?action-viewnews-itemid-1413>

There will, no doubt, be more debate about these suicides. We hope that these three documents reflect some of the recurring themes in the Chinese discussion so far.

NOTES

(1) Foxconn rocked by latest suicide attempt

<http://english.sina.com/business/2010/0407/313048.html>

More information about the suicides and working conditions at Foxconn available below, in English:

Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour (SACOM), "Dying Young: Suicide & China's booming economy"

<http://sacom.hk/archives/640>

China Labour Bulletin, "Another suicide at Foxconn after boss attempts damage control"

<http://www.clb.org.hk/en/node/100769>

CSR Asia, "From Dafen Lisa to Foxconn: Two tales of migrant workers"

http://csr-asia.com/weekly_detail.php?id=12041

ChinaSMACK, "Foxconn Suicides and Secrets, Chinese Netizen Reactions"

<http://www.chinasmack.com/2010/stories/foxconn-suicides-secrets-chinese-netizen-reactions.html>