

Rural China's youth struggling in Foxconn iPhone factories, govt slow to act, says sociologist

Chinese workers struggling to assemble iPhones as consumers queue up to buy newest models, says Jenny Chan of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University at Institute of Chinese Studies webinar.

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10 February, 2022

<https://theprint.in/world/rural-chinas-youth-struggling-in-foxconn-iphone-factories-govt-slow-to-act-says-sociologist/826881/>



Workers on a production floor at a Foxconn factory in Shenzhen, China | Representational image | Commons

New Delhi: As the global demand for iPhones rises, Chinese rural workers are reeling under challenging work conditions — with a high number of suicides reported — in facilities such as those owned by Taiwan-based Foxconn, said Jenny Chan, assistant professor of sociology, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

At a webinar hosted by the New Delhi-based Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) Wednesday, Chan said, “A new generation of Chinese workers are struggling to assemble iPhones while consumers around the globe queue up to buy the newest models.”

Based on her [study](#) of employees at Foxconn — one of Apple’s largest contract manufacturers — from 2010 to 2019, she said, “Students in a range of fields from healthcare to auto repair are placed on the assembly line with no skill training.”

There are an estimated [286 million](#) (28.6 crore) rural migrant workers in China, comprising more than a third of the country’s entire working population.

When Ashok Kantha, a former Indian ambassador to China (2014-2016), asked whether higher authorities had shown responsiveness to the plight of workers, Chan replied, “In China, the local governments at city or provincial level are crucial because they manage local, fiscal conditions... Their responses [to worker suicides] are usually quite slow.”

She added that higher levels of government had invested more in strengthening domestic security rather than in improving the welfare of workers.

Anand P. Krishnan, visiting associate fellow at ICS, pointed out that Foxconn facilities in India have also received pushback from employees. “In December 2021, there was a [massive protest](#) by women workers in Foxconn facilities in Sriperumbudur, Chennai...[over] the pitiable living and sanitary conditions in the facilities,” he said.

In the India episode, according to a [Bloomberg report](#), Apple put Foxconn’s Sriperumbudur factory on probation after an investigation revealed substandard living conditions.

Foxconn apologised for the lapses, and vowed to revamp its management and operations in India.

‘Worker suicides, low labour costs of iPhones’

While speaking about the high number of worker suicides, Chan cited an example from 2010 when Foxconn [built safety nets](#) after a number of employees had jumped to their deaths at its production plants.

“During the summer of 2010, Foxconn employed 150,000 student interns in China — 15 per cent of its entire million-strong Chinese workforce,” she said.

A *Financial Times* report in 2017 quoted interns at facilities in China as saying that they were “forced” by their universities to work at Foxconn plants in order to graduate.

Chan also offered a financial break-up of developing an iPhone, claiming that labour costs are as low as 2 per cent of the overall manufacturing cost.

“Let’s say an Apple iPhone is selling at \$100. Apple will draw the lion’s share with more than 58 per cent, raw materials is about one-fourth, supplier’s gross profit is about 14 per cent and the labour cost is so low that it’s not even 2 per cent,” said Chan.

‘Symbiotic relationship’

Chan’s study also focused on assessing the extent to which the Chinese state and global tech corporations such as Apple fulfilled their responsibilities to protect workers in the context of transnational production.

She argued that there is a “symbiotic” relationship between Foxconn, the Chinese state and labour unions in China.

The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), under which enterprise-level trade unions like Foxconn are registered, is not independent of the Chinese state, she said.

“Across state-owned, foreign-invested and privately owned enterprises, the Chinese party-state has vastly expanded its control to achieve ‘national objectives’,” said Chan.

“Not only Apple, but Dell and HP and IBM — the whole industry — are pushing for just-in-time production. They don’t want to raise the money to store the product in warehouses — they only want to get it done quickly and sell it overnight. These are the practices they are using without calculating carefully for human resources,” she added.

(Edited by Rohan Manoj)