



Foxconn dormitories in Shenzhen.  
Photo: Jordan Pouille.

## #iSlaveat10

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*In January 2017, Apple celebrated the tenth anniversary of the launch of the first model of the iPhone. After a decade, has Apple's extraordinary profitability been coupled with any greater social responsibility? Are the Chinese workers who produce the most lucrative product in the electronics world seeing improved working and living conditions? This essay provides some answers by focussing on two issues: freedom of association and the situation of student interns.*

On 9 January 2017, Apple celebrated the tenth anniversary of the iPhone's debut with an event entitled 'iPhone at Ten: The Revolution Continues'. Since its launch in 2007, the iPhone has remained the company's flagship product and biggest income generator. In 2016, nearly two-thirds of Apple's revenue came from sales of the smartphone. The iPhone is supposed to be revolutionising not only mobile phones, but also corporate social responsibility (CSR). In 2015, when *Time* magazine crowned Apple CEO Tim Cook as one of the world's one hundred most influential people, writer John Lewis hailed Cook's ability to push Apple to 'unimaginable profitability—and greater social responsibility' (2015). What he did not mention was the reality of social irresponsibility confronting Chinese workers who make Apple products.

When discussing the labour rights abuses associated with the production of the iPhone, the name that continually resurfaces is that of the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn Technology Group (hereafter Foxconn). Its collaboration with Apple started back in 2002, as the company was on its way to becoming China's leading exporter of high-tech electronics. Initially, Foxconn was contracted to build Macs and iPods. Then, in 2007, the contract was extended to include the first-generation of iPhones. In 2010, when Foxconn was confronted by a spate of worker suicides in its factories in Shenzhen (Chan 2011), the company was the sole maker of iPhones. After this, however, Apple—following the common practice of pitting suppliers against each other to maximise profit—shifted some of its production to Pegatron, another Taiwanese-owned supplier where labour costs are allegedly even lower.

Since 22 September 2017, Apple has been selling iPhone 8—'a new generation of iPhone', as they market it—on the global markets. Has Apple's 'unimaginable profitability' been coupled with any 'greater

social responsibility'? Are the Chinese workers who produce the most profitable product in the electronic world seeing improved working and living conditions? In this essay, I will attempt to provide some answers with a specific focus on two issues: freedom of association and the situation of 'student interns'.

## Freedom of Association Denied

The Apple Supplier Code of Conduct explicitly highlights the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining (Apple Inc. 2017). Unfortunately, although codes of conduct produced by many multinational companies and industry associations pledge to honour workers' rights to form trade unions, in China the process is dominated by management in the workplace, and is ultimately controlled by the state through the branches of the only trade union whose existence is allowed in the country, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU).

Foxconn's resistance to any call for union democracy emerged in several instances. This was particularly evident in the wake of a riot that erupted at a Foxconn plant in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, at the end of September 2012. In that case, the fury of the workers was triggered by their exasperation with company policies. In the months leading up to the release of the iPhone 5, they had only one day off a month. Also contributing to their grievances was the militaristic security imposed by the company at the male workers' dormitory. When company guards beat two workers for failing to show their staff IDs, and kicked them until they fell to the ground, the workers reached a breaking point. To deal with the fallout, Foxconn announced 'a special day off' for all eighty thousand workers and staff at the facility. On the same day that the riot occurred, Tim Cook assured the world that retail

stores would 'continue to receive iPhone 5 shipments regularly and customers [would be able to] continue to order online and receive an estimated delivery date' (Apple Inc. 2012). But as international news media published articles with blaring headlines like 'Riot Closes China Foxconn Factory' (Al Jazeera 2012) and 'Riot Reported at Apple Partner Manufacturer Foxconn's iPhone 5 Plant' (Apple Insider 2012), Apple was compelled to reassure consumers around the world that it was not running sweatshops. It was then, amidst the factory-wide riot, that a twenty-one-year-old worker wrote an open letter to Foxconn's Chief Executive (Drahokoupil et al. 2016). The letter ended with the following words: 'Please remember, from now on, to reassess the responsibilities of the company union so that genuine trade unions can play an appropriate role'. Still, even on that occasion, this bottom-up demand was completely ignored by the company management (Chan et al. 2013).

While over the years there have been union elections at Foxconn, these initiatives have been mostly a formality to demonstrate Foxconn's supposed commitment to Apple's CSR principles. In an interview with a Foxconn worker in March 2015, I asked about the union election that had taken place earlier that year:

Not many workers knew about the company union elections. The promotional posters were placed in the dark corners in the factory. The management did not do it for our information. They did it to complete the standard process only.

On several occasions, supervisors manipulated the elections by explicitly instructing workers to cast their votes for designated candidates. Out of fear of retaliation, workers followed the managerial instructions. As one worker candidly admitted to me:

We're asked by our supervisors to check the right box. What's laughable is that all the candidates are complete strangers to me. Afterwards, I checked the information about the winner, and found out that he's a senior manager from the same department [as me]! But I've never heard of him. I believe that all the winners were handpicked by the senior management.

In the words of another worker: 'After all, we have no idea who's running for the elections. Perhaps only our boss knows about them!' This does not mean that workers are not aspiring to have their own organisations. In the course of my multi-year research project, Foxconn workers have repeatedly made calls for democratising the company union. I argue that having a democratic, representative trade union, instead of a management-dominated one, is critical to ensure workers' rights.

## Student Workers at Foxconn

Without independent labour representation, for years Foxconn has been able to get away with using 'student interns' who are not legally recognised as employees, and are often forced by their schools to work at the company's plants. In 2010, following China's economic recovery from the global financial crisis, 28,044 student interns from over two hundred technical and vocational schools all over China were assigned to the integrated Digital Product Business Group (iDPBG)—a Foxconn business group that exclusively serves Apple—to work alongside Foxconn employees in Shenzhen. This was a six-fold increase from the 4,539 interns who, according to Foxconn's internal magazine, had been assigned to Foxconn's Shenzhen plants in 2007 (Chan 2017). During the summer of 2010, Foxconn employed 150,000 student interns nationwide—15 percent of

its entire million-strong Chinese workforce (Foxconn 2010).

In recent years, China's leaders have sought to boost labour productivity through expanded investment in vocational training. The number of vocational high school students doubled from 11.7 million in 2001 to 22.4 million in 2010, even as regular high schools still enrolled a larger number of students than vocational high schools nationwide. Vocational schools follow a work-study model that emphasises the integration of education with production, as stated in China's 1996 Vocational Education Law (Ministry of Education 1996). They offer employment-oriented courses for eligible applicants who have completed nine years of schooling. The official goal for 2020 is to recruit 23.5 million students—50 percent of the nation's senior secondary student population—into three-year vocational programmes (State Council 2010).

In this, Foxconn saw an opportunity to exploit student interns. A 2011 company statement claimed: 'Foxconn cooperates with vocational schools to provide students with practical skills training that will enable them to find employment after they graduate from these programmes' (Foxconn 2011). But Foxconn has said nothing either about the contents of its training programmes, nor about its skill evaluation methods. Working hand in glove with local governments, Foxconn has simply violated China's internship regulations designed to protect students and assure that their career needs are served (Chan 2015c).

In the words of a sixteen-year-old Foxconn student intern whom I interviewed in 2011:

Come on, what do you think we've learned standing for more than ten hours a day manning machines on the line? What's an internship? There's no relation to what we study in school. Every day is just a repetition of one or two simple motions, like a robot.

To this day, the company not only recruits students regardless of their field of study, it also routinely recruits them much earlier than is legally allowed, while they are still in their first or second year, rather than their final year of vocational school. Even worse, these so-called internships are often extended from three months to a full year to meet production needs, with scant regard for the students' training needs.

Under mounting pressure, in 2016, the central government finally took some measures to protect the basic rights of student interns. Vocational schools were instructed to manage student internships in accordance with new regulations that came into force on 11 April 2016, superseding the 2007 Administrative Measures (Ministry of Education 2016). Under this new regulatory regime, the duration of workplace-based internships should not exceed six months. Moreover, the regulations not only require that student internships provide substantial educational content and work-skill training, but also mandate comprehensive labour protections for student interns, such as eight-hour working days, no overtime and no night shifts. Above all, no more than 10 percent of the labour force at 'any given facility', or no more than 20 percent of the workers in 'any given work position', should consist of student interns at any point in time.

However, in spite of these legal improvements, the government has left intact incentives for corporations to continue to prioritise internship programmes as sources of cheap labour. With the passage of the 2016 Regulations, the statutory minimum level for paying interns is clearly specified: 'Wages shall be *at least* 80 percent of that of employees during the probationary period'. In other words, employers are still permitted to give student interns only 80 percent of the income offered to full employees on the job, whether or not students' productivity is less.

## Ten Years On, the Campaign Continues

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Global supply chains are not benign spaces of transnational trade. While rooted in local terrains, proliferating labour struggles in China have to simultaneously confront forces of global capitalism and the Chinese state. Workers are protesting and striking, labour rights groups are issuing statements demanding that corporations accept responsibility for worker abuses, and engaged scholars are analysing the structures of domination that drive labour control and eventually spark resistance. In solidarity with Chinese workers and student interns, and in an attempt to focus the spotlight on the ongoing illegal practices of Foxconn, Hong Kong-based advocacy group Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM) has marked 2017 as the year of the global anti-sweatshop campaign '#iSlaveat10—No More iSlave'.

However, in spite of these transnational initiatives, the most important driving force for change remains the workers themselves. The current protests in localised and dispersed sites of resistance across China need to develop further through intra- and inter-class lines and across the urban-rural divide, growing into a more broadly based social movement. It is the evolving consciousness and praxis of the new generation of Chinese workers that will shape the future of China and global capitalism.

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