



SFGate: China factory seeks counselors as suicides rise

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Hon Hai Group, maker of Apple Inc.'s iPhones and Hewlett-Packard Co. computers in Taipei, said it's recruiting mental-health professionals and building leisure facilities in its Chinese factories after at least seven employee suicides this year.

The company has deployed 100 counselors and its health division plans to work more closely with local governments and academic institutions to support its 800,000 workers in China, Edmund Ding, a spokesman at the world's largest contract manufacturer of electronics, also known as Foxconn Technology Group, said by phone Sunday. He declined to comment on why workers may be taking their own lives.

The measures, which include the establishment of an "emotional support hot line" and prayers from Buddhist monks, have prevented more than 30 suicide attempts, according to the company. The deaths underscore the need to improve the quality of life for Chinese factory workers, say groups including China Labor Watch and China Labor Bulletin.

"It's not just related to Foxconn. There's a lot of pressure on young workers in factories all over China," said Geoffrey Crothall, communications director at China Labor Bulletin in Hong Kong. "Very few people pay attention to other factories. Foxconn is always in the spotlight, largely because of its relationship to Apple."

A worker died from injuries after falling from a company dormitory Friday, three days after a 24-year-old worker jumped to her death from an apartment block in Shenzhen, according to Hon Hai statements last week.

Excluding the death Friday, whose cause has yet to be determined, seven Hon Hai employees have killed themselves this year and two workers have attempted suicide, Ding said.

On July 16 last year, 25-year-old Sun Tanyong jumped off a Shenzhen dormitory after one of the 16 iPhone prototypes he was assigned to mail went missing. Apple said at the time that the company was "saddened by the tragic loss." Jill Tan, a spokeswoman for Apple in Hong Kong, declined to comment on the recent Hon Hai deaths.

"Recently, there's been a series of unfortunate events at Foxconn," Hon Hai said in a statement Wednesday. "Although the events aren't closely connected to the operations and management of Foxconn, we hope to improve our management and increase mental-health counseling."

The Taiwanese company assembles most of its electronics in Shenzhen, north of Hong Kong. The city, home to network-equipment-makers Huawei and ZTE Corp., was China's first Special Economic Zone, with special incentives and administrative privileges dedicated to developing the country's exports and attracting foreign investment.

Given the pay and benefits, Foxconn shouldn't be considered a "sweatshop," magazine Southern Weekly, based in Guangzhou, said in an article Wednesday written by an intern it said worked at Foxconn for 28 days. Still, workers lacked entertainment facilities such as parks or movie theaters, according to the report.

"I believe Foxconn's management is one of the strictest in China," Li Qiang, executive director of China Labor Watch, which is based in New York, said in an e-mail. The Foxconn incidents "can be said to be part of a wider problem in China, with quite a few factories suffering similar problems from time to time."

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