



House Bill Would Improve Labor Conditions in Chinese Toy Factories, Advocates Tell Panel

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Dec. 11— Congress must do more to stop U.S. companies from importing goods made with forced labor, worker advocates told a panel Dec. 11.

The hearing before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China focused on the Chinese toy manufacturing sector, in which factories are subject only to flimsy voluntary audits.

Those audits do nothing but protect the reputations of American companies—including Disney, Mattel Inc., Fisher-Price, Hasbro Inc. and Crayola LLC—that contract with the Chinese factories, said Brian Campbell, director of policy and legal programs at the International Labor Rights Forum.

No real change can happen without the added element of worker voice, Campbell said.

The hearing stemmed from a report issued Nov. 18 by China Labor Watch finding evidence of poorly maintained machinery, inadequate protective equipment and a lack of safety training in Chinese factories.

Legislation Needed, Advocates Say.

Campbell called on Congress to pass the Business Supply Chain Transparency on Trafficking and Slavery Act (H.R. 4842), which would require U.S. companies to publish annual reports disclosing any forced labor, slavery, human trafficking and child labor in their supply chains.

The bill, introduced in June by Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), was referred to the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections but hasn't received a hearing.

Campbell also said a legally binding compact that offered tangible remedies to workers, such as the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, would help Chinese toy workers.

'Hamlet Without the Prince of Denmark.'

Earl Brown, China program director at the AFL-CIO, agreed, saying that people in China are afraid even to go to local government offices and request documents because their identities will be recorded, much less raise complaints against their employers.

"Auditing [alone] is like staging Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet' without the prince of Denmark," Brown said. "You can't find out whether occupational safety and health is a reality on the shop floor unless you talk to workers."

Only workers on the shop floor know whether a load is too heavy or the pace of work is too fast, said Brown, "not a 25-year-old accountant for one of the four accounting firms who are able to pretend they don't interweave in a way that presents a conflict of interest."

Business Group Defends Audits.

The audits are conducted by the International Council of Toy Industries, a U.S.-based trade group. William Reese, one of the group's board members, told the panel that workers do indeed have a voice at factories that pass the council's certification screening, by way of telephone help lines at the workplace.

But Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), the commission's chair, expressed skepticism that workers would actually use the help lines because they wouldn't be likely to believe their calls would be kept confidential.

Li Qiang, executive director of advocacy group China Labor Watch, testified through a translator that during a recent investigation of Chinese toy factories, China Labor Watch staff called the help lines several times "and there was really no effect."

In another instance, the family members of a worker who committed suicide at a factory that contracts with Mattel were beaten by factory guards in the course of inquiring about the circumstances of her death, Qiang said.

Many of the calls taken on the help lines come from workers who actually want to work more hours, Reese said.

Brown was the only lawmaker to attend the hearing.

Subcontractor Issues Not Resolved.

Brown also asked Reese about certified Chinese factories that subcontract to uncertified factories. Reese said that the issue was "complicated" and that his organization was "still working on it."

In some cases, American companies will go directly to local government officials to weaken Chinese labor law provisions, Qiang said. He told the panel that he had met with executives at Hasbro and Mattel who "very well understand what's going on in these factories." One Mattel executive directly told China Labor Watch that the company had permission from the government to push its workers beyond the allowable overtime limits, Qiang said.

Mattel and Hasbro were invited to appear before the panel but declined, Brown said.

Qiang also testified that some improvements have taken place in the Chinese electronics goods sector, due in part to public pressure and media reports. The same attention isn't being paid to the toy industry, however, and the factories are taking advantage of the lack of attention.

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