



USA TODAY: Suicides raise workers rights issues

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SHENZHEN, China — Newly installed silver nets stretch across the balconies of Foxconn's massive employee apartment complexes in this booming industrial city, grim reminders of the recent wave of workers who jumped to their deaths.

The suicides — 10 of Foxconn Technology's employees have died this year, and three others have been injured — have raised questions about whether the working conditions of factory employees along China's Pearl River Delta have something to do with the deaths.

Workers rights groups say that low pay and grueling work at Foxconn factories have a role in the suicides. They say similar problems at factories elsewhere in the region highlight the need to reform labor practices throughout China.

"Since 2005 to now, we have recorded hundreds of suicides and attempted suicides by workers who have not been paid," says Geoffrey Crothall, a spokesman for China Labor Bulletin, a group that fights for workers rights in China. "This is quite common" among migrant laborers who move from rural areas to the cities seeking work, he says.

Foxconn, a Taiwanese company, is one of the largest makers of electronic components for companies including Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard. Foxconn spokesman Edmund Ding says the company is looking into whether "work-related causes played any role in these tragedies."

Initial results show that "there is no single cause" for the suicides, Ding says. Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard say they are also investigating the situation to determine what to do next.

Worker suicides have plagued Shenzhen telecom company Huawei Technologies in recent years as well. And an employee of Genda Electronics, based in Shenzhen, committed suicide in April after he was suspected of stealing a box of electronics parts, the local *Guangzhou Daily* newspaper reported.

In China, labor laws that took effect in 2008 have greatly improved migrant workers' rights. Although "you don't hear about the robber-baron type of abuses that you heard about 30 years ago," it's still common for factories to offer such low wages that workers are forced to work overtime, says Phelim Kine, Asia researcher for New York City-based Human Rights Watch.

China's economic boom has improved living standards for migrant workers and their families, but it has also widened the gap between the rich and the poor, exacerbating social tensions.

"All the indicators are that the level of dissatisfaction among (factory) workers has been quite intense for a while, and it's probably getting worse," Crothall says.

Critics say the suicides show that despite improvements in working conditions — including higher wages at many factories in the region because of a labor shortage — much remains to be done to ensure that workers are treated fairly.

China Labor Watch, a New York-based advocacy group that has conducted dozens of interviews with Foxconn workers, says it has found that employees have to produce as many as 4,000 computers each shift.

To ease workers' stress, Foxconn should lower the production quota and only allow them to work five days a week instead of six, says Quang Li, executive director of China Labor Watch.

Ding, the Foxconn spokesman, says the company is doing "everything possible to prevent tragedies such as this from being repeated." The company is providing counseling to employees and planning to raise certain workers' wages, a measure it began looking at earlier this year amid the region's labor shortage.

Jing Jun, a sociology professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, says that although long hours, military-style management techniques and a weak union are common features of factories in the delta, they're "hardly direct causes of the suicide cluster" at Foxconn.

Outside Foxconn's Shenzhen factories, workers who would give only their last names for fear of being reprimanded by the company or by

the Chinese government said working conditions are hard.

One worker who gave her full name, 21-year-old Amity Ding, says she couldn't handle the demands of working on Foxconn's product line because employees weren't allowed to rest until they met their quota. So she asked her supervisor to move her to another division. She now takes inventory in the warehouse; it's a job that is not as stressful, she says.

Ding says the suicides have made some people feel their sadness has turned to numbness.

"Some people don't feel like working in there because of the suicides," she says.

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