



BBC Says Apple Suppliers Continue to Violate Labor Standards

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A BBC documentary accuses Apple of breaking promises to improve working conditions at its suppliers, but Apple says it continues to make progress on a difficult issue.

The new allegations re-focus attention of working conditions four years after a rash of suicides at Foxconn, Apple's primary Chinese manufacturer, prompted the tech giant to pledge changes including preventing the use of underage workers, auditing more supplier factories and educating workers about their rights.

In a documentary that aired this week, the BBC said undercover reporters found that Taiwan's Pegatron, which makes some iPhones, was violating Apple's guidelines by mandating overtime for workers, requiring workers to attend meetings without pay and forcing workers to live in overcrowded dormitories. The BBC said one undercover reporter, working in a factory making parts for Apple computers, had to work 18 days in a row despite repeated requests for a day off.

The documentary also provided evidence that tin from illegal mines in Indonesia could be making its way into Apple's supply chain.

The BBC said Apple wouldn't be interviewed on camera for its story.

Jeff Williams, Apple's senior vice president in charge of operations, responded in a Friday e-mail to employees in the United Kingdom.

"Panorama's report implied that Apple isn't improving working conditions," Williams wrote. "Let me tell you, nothing could be further from the truth."

Apple said in the email it conducted 630 in-person audits of suppliers in 2014. Williams said every audit uncovers problems, which Apple seeks to eliminate.

Williams said Apple suppliers met its 60-hour-a-week work limit 93% of the time. That's an improvement from several years ago, when 70-hour weeks were common, Williams said. "We can still do better. And we will," wrote Williams.

China Labor Watch, a nonprofit labor group, said violations similar to those found by the BBC are widespread across Apple's supply chain. "Apple is always finding excuses for its unrealized commitments," executive director Li Qiang said in a statement. "We are focused on what Apple does, not what it says."

Richard Locke, a professor at Brown University and chairman of the Apple Academic Advisory Board, an independent group working with Apple to improve labor conditions among its suppliers, said the policing of work-hour limits remains a persistent issue for Apple and other companies.

Based on the audit reports and other data, Locke said that he's been "extremely impressed" by Apple's efforts on labor issues, where he said it has demonstrated improvement in tackling tough problems. Locke is not paid by Apple and has also researched supplier practices at Nike, Hewlett-Packard, and others. Locke said it is difficult to police the issues because of the complexity of global supply chains and limited number of audits.

The BBC also found a 12-year old boy working in dangerous conditions mining for tin at an illegal mine in Indonesia. One gang collecting tin from that area said it sold to a smelter on Apple's list of suppliers.

Williams said Apple is appalled at what is going on in Indonesia, where he accused the government of not adequately policing mines.

He said Apple could buy tin from suppliers outside Indonesia, but chose to continue to do business in the country in an effort to improve conditions.

Tracing the origin of minerals used in the production of electronics is extremely difficult because smelters often buy from a wide range of sources. Earlier this year, Apple said it doesn't use tantalum—a key metal used in electronic components—from sources that use the proceeds to fund armed groups in Africa.

But it has struggled to secure that level of assurance with other metals widely used in electronics such as gold, tin, and tungsten.

Williams said Apple is considering using some of the approaches that worked well with tantalum in tracing the origin of tin.

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