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## The Tragedy of the Foxconn Sweatshop

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Recently, yet another Foxconn worker has jumped to his death, bringing the total number of Foxconn suicides in 2010 to ten. In light on these events, some have denounced Foxconn as a "sweatshop." Others have spoken out in defense of the company, arguing that, compared to similar manufactures, Foxconn can boast relatively humane management and fairly good benefits, and cannot be characterized as a sweatshop.

I believe all factories that overlook the basic needs of their workers to put profits first are sweatshops, and Foxconn clearly fits that model. In an investigation of Foxconn conducted by *China Labor Watch*, we learned firsthand of the intense pressure under which Foxconn production line workers are forced to operate. Moreover, because Foxconn's base salary of 900 RMB per month is insufficient to cover basic living expenses in its home city of Shenzhen, Foxconn workers have no choice but to work massive amounts of overtime to support themselves and their families, and are always, as workers in the computer production department stated, "extremely exhausted," and "under great pressure."

On average, workers in this department are required to perform a separate work-related task every seven seconds, each one demanding their complete attention. Over a ten hour shift, they are required to assemble 4,000 computers. As one worker argued "we work every day to be faster than a machine." In this environment, it is not difficult to imagine how the normal human condition breaks down.

In 2008, Foxconn exported US\$55.6 Billion worth of products from China. With approximately 800,000 employees on the mainland, and each employee earning an average salary of US\$150 per month, Foxconn's total payroll expenditures for that year amounted to US\$1.44 Billion, or just 2.6% of all consumer sales from China.

Clearly, workers' rights are trampled for the sake of profits at Foxconn, and Foxconn is indeed a sweatshop. Sweatshops are not determined through a process of "comparison." The fact that compared to other, similar manufacturers, Foxconn has "fairly good benefits" and "humane management" cannot conceal the fact that it is, in the end, a sweatshop, one with a management style and philosophy that devalues workers' contributions.

Yet if we continue to merely criticize sweatshops, this will never solve the problem. For a long time, we have ignored the fundamental issue of China's economic development model, and its role in providing an environment ripe for the establishment of thousands of sweatshops. China's development is measured largely by the speed of its economic growth, completely discounting the contribution of workers to the process which they help achieve. Following China's deepening participation in the global economy, this trend has only intensified.

No man is created solely to work. Work is a way to realize one's own self worth, and to enjoy the material benefits of his labor. Under the current economic development model, China's rapidly growing economy cannot even guarantee workers' basic human needs, to say nothing of providing a sense of purpose.

Two factors have created this situation. The first is a sole focus on profits while ignoring workers basic needs. China's economic development has been propped up by the long hours and low wages of millions of workers. The

second is China's highly inequitable distribution system. Profits from manufacturing indirectly flow into the financial system, real estate, and other industries and foreign companies, while China's workers struggle to afford basic food and clothing. One may well ask if this system, which allows a small, favored group to consume large quantities of luxury items at the expense of the mass of impoverished workers, is reasonable.

Economic development must go hand in hand with comprehensive development overall. China's workers, who have made great contributions to the country's economic development, must be able to work with dignity and enjoy the fruits of their labor. The Foxconn situation reflects the biases and inadequacies inherent within the current Chinese economic development model. The suicide of the ten Foxconn workers has made this painfully obvious, and eight worker deaths stand as a silent protest to the shortcomings of this system. If this economic development model is unable to realize the value of its workers, sadly, Foxconn will not be the only sweatshop driving workers to their deaths, and suicide will not be the most shocking form of protest workers adopt.

Li Qiang is founder and executive director of China Labor Watch, a New York-based non-profit organization that promotes labor rights in China.

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