Your New 'Star Wars' Toy Might Come From Chinese Sweatshop Labor

Source: International Business Times

Author: Cole Stangler

With the new "Star Wars" movie finally arriving on American screens this week, fans can choose from a mouthwatering array of products to commemorate the return of their beloved film series -- from coffee mugs shaped like Stormtrooper helmets to replicas of the Millennium Falcon. But for many of the Chinese laborers churning out toys for U.S. markets, these items could carry a very different meaning.

Last month, the New York City-based nongovernmental organization China Labor Watch released a report documenting worker exploitation at five Chinese toy suppliers. The companies identified have ties to some of the leading American brands that sell "Star Wars"-themed toys: Hasbro, Mattel and Disney. The brands do not publicly disclose the names of all their suppliers, and they didn’t respond to inquiries about the sourcing of film-related merchandise, but according to China Labor Watch, which relied on undercover research for its report, at least one of the suppliers it identified was making "Star Wars"-themed toys, for Mattel. And life at the factory, according to the group’s investigation, is rough.

In May 2011, a 45-year-old female worker at the supplier, known as the Shenzhen Winson Precision Manufacturing Company, jumped to her death, allegedly because of pressure from bosses to work more quickly. Today, according to the investigation from China Labor Watch, many of the 1,000 workers at Winson spend their one off day per week resting in dilapidated dorm rooms. Some of them, the report found, pass the time by counting airplanes from the nearby international airport.

Workers also -- at least, at one point -- made the Hot Wheels "Star Wars' Death Star Battle Track Set, according to the investigation. The product is sold online by popular U.S. retailers such as Toys R Us, Amazon and Walmart. Mattel offers the toy in its online store for $15.99. That’s equivalent to about eight and a half hours’ worth of earnings for Winson workers, who make $1.88 an hour, according to the report.

The report also found several violations of Chinese labor law at the supplier, which operates two factories in Shenzhen: Workers face discrimination based on age and gender. New workers cannot be older than 30, and certain jobs are segregated by sex, according to the investigation. Moreover, employees are supposed to undergo 24 hours of safety training, but only received 25 minutes of pre-job training, the report found. Other alleged abuses include a lack of safety equipment, overtime law violations and unsanitary housing conditions.

Mattel spokesman Alex Clark said the company is "committed to ensuring every single person making our toys and products is treated fairly, with respect and is able to work in a safe and healthy environment.” He also said, "We are devoted to ensuring that our manufacturing facilities throughout the world are safe and ethical places to work, and we reject any suggestion to the contrary.”

Hasbro, Mattel and Disney are all members of an ethical manufacturing program overseen by the International Council of Toy Industries. The group, which certifies factories for complying with its labor code, said it took the allegations in the China Labor Watch report “extremely seriously” and that a “follow-up investigation is well underway.” It also said, “Our first priority is always the safety and well-being of workers.”

Kevin Slaten, program coordinator at China Labor Watch, said the companies aren’t going far enough to improve working conditions with their suppliers.

Slaten said Western brands should disclose the names of factories where specific toys come from. At the moment, “we can’t tell where they’re being produced,” he said. “If they wanted to be transparent about working conditions, if they wanted the public to know the code of conduct they espouse is valid, then they’d be open to that.

“The track record of the toy industry tells us that other ‘Star Wars’ toys produced in China under Mattel, Hasbro and Disney brands may originate from workplaces with major labor abuses,” he continued. “‘Star Wars’ and Disney should be transparent about their supply chain by releasing a list of factories producing ‘Star Wars’ toys.”