In China, Factory Workers Alleged Poisoning From iPhone Production

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Transcript

JIM LEHRER: Finally tonight, human costs from China’s industrial revolution.

JEFFREY KAYE: Low-wage workers in China’s industrial heartland are increasingly speaking out about labor conditions. Workers at this factory say that, in 2009, they were poisoned making iPhones.

MAN (through translator): I want to tell all the American consumers the story behind the iPhones. We made iPhones with our health.

JEFFREY KAYE: Interviewed in a dormitory for factory employees, these workers say they cleaned iPhone screens using n-hexane, a toxic chemical made from crude oil.

WOMAN (through translator): I used my left hand to hold the iPhone screen when it came down the work line. And with my right hand, I used a cotton cloth dipped in hexane to wipe the screen.

JEFFREY KAYE: Independent studies from around the world have determined that the chemical the workers used, n-hexane, causes neurological damage ranging from dizziness to paralysis. Those symptoms compare to ones these workers say they suffered.

MAN (through translator): I have sweaty feet and hands. I feel very tired.

WOMAN (through translator): At the very beginning, I didn’t know I was sick. I just felt weak and tired. Then, slowly, I found it difficult to walk or go up the steps of the bus. Then, one day, I fell over and decided I needed to check what was wrong with me. So, I went to a hospital. I went to many hospitals in many cities. I eventually became very ill. I couldn’t walk. I couldn’t wash my hair. I became very weak.

JEFFREY KAYE: Is there anyone else here who was hospitalized?

How long were you in hospital?

MAN (through translator): From November 2009 until July 2010, so about eight months.

JEFFREY KAYE: Their employer is a subsidiary of the Wintek Corporation, headquartered in Taiwan.

NARRATOR: Wintek ranks number one among small- to medium-sized LCD display manufacturers.

JEFFREY KAYE: Besides supplying Apple, Wintek also makes touch-screen panels for Nokia, Garmin and other companies.

NARRATOR: Wintek lights up the displays that grant oncoming wishes.

JEFFREY KAYE: The case of the iPhone workers has shed light on some of the human costs of China’s rapid industrialization and prosperity. The nation of 1.3 billion people is transforming itself, turning increasingly into a country that consumes as well as produces goods.

For example, Apple’s four stores in China, including this one in Beijing, are on average the firm’s most profitable. China’s increased wealth has raised living standards, although the nation faces a growing gap between rich and poor.

At the same time, authorities struggle to balance the needs of industry with the welfare of the environment and workers. To Ma Jun, a prominent environmentalist, Wintek and Apple illustrate a troubling pattern in the global supply chain.

His Beijing-based organization, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, tries to track China’s growing problems with industrial
pollution and worker health.

MA JUN, Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs: Wintek represents the fact that China is now the workshop of the world. We're manufacturing for the entire Western world. And while we are exporting all these cheap products overseas, millions of workers are exposed to some of the unhealthy working conditions.

JEFFREY KAYE: Wintek employees went public about their grievances in January 2010. Although China officially bans strikes and independent unions, worker protests are common. And in a several-hour walkout over a wage dispute, the Wintek workers also complained about their exposure to toxic chemicals.

Last May, Wintek announced it had discontinued the use of n-hexane, had provided treatment as well as compensation for affected workers, and had stepped up monitoring at the factory.

MA JUN: Apple's response is very minimal, if not totally nonresponsive.

JEFFREY KAYE: Over the years, Ma has complained to many multinational corporations about their treatment of workers and the environment, but he says Apple stands out for being particularly unresponsive.

MA JUN: We're -- we're not trying to single out any single company. Apple singled out itself through the process by shutting down the door of communications entirely. And so, it's unique among all the -- all the I.T. brands.

JEFFREY KAYE: Both Wintek and Apple declined our interview requests for this story. But in February of this year, Apple issued a supplier responsibility progress report.

It said, "In 2010, we learned that 137 workers at the Suzhou facility of Wintek, one of Apple's suppliers, had suffered adverse health effects following exposure to n-hexane." Apple called the incidents a core violation and said it had required Wintek to fix their ventilation system. The report added, "Apple has verified that all affected workers have been treated successfully, and we continue to monitor their medical reports until full recuperation."

But the workers here say their recovery is slow.

And this man says his symptoms persist.

MAN (through translator): The specialist in Suzhou Hospital said I need treatment immediately. But I went back to my company, and they said I don't need to. So, there is a dispute going on between the hospital and my company.

JEFFREY KAYE: You're all continuing to work there, knowing that you may be exposing yourself to future sickness. Why do you continue to stay there?

WOMAN (through translator): I wouldn't be able to get a job anywhere else because I have this occupational disease. I wouldn't be able to get health insurance anywhere else.

JEFFREY KAYE: Apple says Wintek has covered the costs of medical care for the workers, but advocate Debby Chan says Apple should do more.

DEBBY CHAN, Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior: Apple owes the workers an apology and remedy.

JEFFREY KAYE: Chan is with Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior, a Hong Kong advocacy group that, for six years, has researched worker rights and safety issues.

What more remedy do you expect?

DEBBY CHAN: At least it should cover the long-term health impact to the workers, because the workers, they are really worried that, if they leave the factory, maybe two years, five years, yet, if their health is deteriorating, then there won't be anyone responsible for them.

JEFFREY KAYE: For its part, Apple, in its report, promised to better police its suppliers. It said it was requiring 80 facilities that were not properly storing or handling hazardous chemicals to change their policies.

JIM LEHRER: Jeff Kaye's next report will focus on reforming the health-care system in China.