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Give Apple workers a voice in their future

By joining the Fair Labor Association, Apple has embarked on its latest program of auditing its suppliers, ostensibly to investigate and remedy the appalling abuses in its supply chain that have been well documented and widely reported. While Apple claims that it is finally taking the issue seriously, its top-down auditing approach can never be a long-term solution to the systematic violations of labour rights that are occurring every day in the manufacture of electronic products. Indeed, Apple promised in 2006 that auditing would protect the rights of workers in its global supply chain, with results that are all too apparent.

The FLA will likely publish next week some of the results of its audits at Foxconn and the organization will no doubt report that labor rights violations are taking place at these factories. Since violations at Foxconn have been well documented by independent investigators, and in many cases admitted by Apple itself, the FLA could hardly claim that all is well. We also have no doubt that the FLA's report will be coupled with another round of promises from Apple and Foxconn that they will finally clean up their act. The question, however, is not whether there are severe labor rights problems in Apple's supply chain. This has been obvious for years. And the question is not whether Apple will promise, again, to fix these problems. They surely will. The question is whether anything will actually change.

Because once the audits are over and FLA has gone home, the workers in the factories will again be left to deal, as best they can, with the brutal labour conditions that are imposed on them. Any hope that conditions for workers will improve rests not on the work of auditors, but on the ability of workers themselves to monitor whether their labour rights are being respected and to push for remedies when they are not.

If Apple is genuinely concerned about improving the labour rights of workers that manufacture its products, it must ensure that they can negotiate with their employer to bring lasting change to the way that work is performed and compensated. For the Foxconn workers this means allowing workers to conduct elections to democratically select their own representatives in the workplace who can negotiate with management on the pay and conditions of the workforce. Such elections must be conducted by the workers without interference from management and all managers must be prohibited from taking up union positions. In order for the elected worker representatives to be able to meet management on an equal footing to negotiate on pay and working conditions, they will need support in terms of skills and knowledge. Apple must therefore insist that union representatives be allowed to access training and capacity building that is independent of management, so that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to advocate on behalf of the workers they represent.

Collective bargaining is the mechanism that will enable workers to negotiate with management on appropriate levels of pay and decent working conditions and is one of the fundamental labour rights recognized by the ILO. It is especially critical to addressing health and safety problems. Apple and Foxconn must immediately establish a schedule of negotiations which will lead to a collective agreement that covers all aspects of work including wages and working hours, overtime, health and safety, etc. A collective agreement would help reduce the vast disparity between workers' pay and the massive profits generated by both Foxconn and Apple, which has announced that it has \$45 billion to spend on buying back its own shares rather than on improving pay and conditions for the workers that make its products.

There is no question that giving workers a real say in the way that their work is organized and remunerated will challenge the repressive management practices for which Foxconn is notorious. Foxconn must learn to work together with its employees, through their democratically elected representatives, to find solutions together that reconcile the demands of production with recognition of workers' rights. This will mean giving access to information on wages, working hours, production schedules and financial information that enable worker representatives to take an equal seat at the table and work with management to resolve the issues. It will also mean that Apple must roll up its sleeves and get involved directly in the bargaining process, so that its demands on unit prices and production deadlines do not undermine agreements on pay and working conditions.

Bargaining should take place above a floor of decent minimum standards. This must include an immediate end to illegal overtime hours, coupled with wage increase to ensure that every worker in Apple's supply chain is paid a genuine living wage that covers basic needs for a family for a statutory work week (40 hours in China). Given Apple's gargantuan profits and mountainous horde of cash, there is no financial, practical or moral excuse for any worker making Apple products to go another day without being paid a living wage for a normal workweek.

Finally, it is clear that organizations like ours will need to continue to scrutinize conditions in Apple's supply chain for the foreseeable future, to hold the company accountable and remedy any abuses. For this to be possible, Apple must be more forthcoming about the identity of its suppliers, not just releasing the company names, but the countries and specific factories in which all the components that go into its products are made.

Contact persons:

<p>Jenny Holdcroft International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) jholdcroft@imfmetal.org Tel: +41 (0)79 616 0103</p>	<p>Chan Sze Wan, Debby Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour (SACOM) debby@sacom.hk Tel: +852 23925464</p>
<p>Mathieu Debroux International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Mathieu.Debroux@ituc-csi.org Tel: +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 62 10 18</p>	<p>Irene Schipper GoodElectronics and MakeITFair i.schipper@somo.nl Tel: + 31 6 30390001</p>
<p>Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman SumOfUs taren.sk@gmail.com Tel: +1 202 510 0065</p>	