Foxconn and the U.S. Labor Movement

written by Zhang Mazi | August 6, 2024

I am a Chinese socialist, and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Tempest Collective. I immigrated to the United States in the last couple of years. Before that, I worked in the Chinese tech industry for many years, and I hope to draw from that experience in my talk. Today, I will discuss labor solidarity through supply chains, focusing mainly on Foxconn. The focus on Foxconn is meant to be a starting point for understanding the possibilities for organizing across U.S.-China supply chains. We can apply many of these observations to other Chinese companies, and indeed to other global companies as well.

First, what is Foxconn? Foxconn is the largest electronic contract manufacturer in the world, with an annual revenue of more than $200 billion. Foxconn's headquarters are in Taiwan, but it has factories all over China, as well as in Brazil, India, Mexico, and the United States. So, Foxconn is truly a global conglomerate. And what does Foxconn manufacture? As a contract electronics manufacturing company, Foxconn does not produce anything branded as Foxconn. However, most of the major electronics we know and use in our daily lives bear Foxconn's mark somewhere inside them. Foxconn is most well-known as a contract manufacturer for Apple. Your iPhone, your iPad, your Mac PCs, or your other Apple products either have been assembled in a Foxconn factory or have components manufactured in a Foxconn factory. Outside of Apple, various components of Android phones are also produced in Foxconn factories. Your Android phone may be assembled in Vietnam, Thailand, or elsewhere, but the audio or Wi-Fi module inside the phone may have gone through a Foxconn assembly line. PlayStation, Nintendo, and Amazon's whole line of electronic products (i.e., the Echo Dot and its AI assistants), are all manufactured by Foxconn. These are the biggest products that we know of. Besides these company's products, Foxconn manufactures several other electronic products. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of all electronic devices in the world contain components manufactured by Foxconn. That includes routers, IoT (Internet of Things) devices, smart appliances like smart fridges, and even your washing machine might have a Foxconn chip in it. Likewise, 5G chips inside your phones, biotech solutions, TV servers, computers, tablets, cameras, speakers, etc., were probably created in a Foxconn factory at some point.

Since Foxconn is such a giant conglomerate that manufactures so many things, it also employs many workers. Although it is a Taiwanese company, Foxconn has its primary manufacturing hub located in China. It was one of the first foreign companies to move to China after it opened up to foreign investment under Deng Xiaoping. Foxconn helped pioneer the entire Chinese manufacturing model: underpaid workers live inside these large complexes, then work in buildings opposite from the dormitories in which they live.

Currently, Foxconn employs more than 800,000 workers in China. That number fluctuates yearly, depending on how well the company is doing, and on their hiring and production quota. Usually, more than half of the workers in Foxconn factories are "dispatch workers." Dispatch workers are temporary workers who are not directly employed by Foxconn, but are contracted with third-party

dispatch labor agencies—which are notorious for regularly flouting labor law. Foxconn subcontracts its human resources and hiring departments to other agencies, and workers sign up with these agencies to work at Foxconn. The benefit for Foxconn is that they get to maintain a flexible labor force. Global demands shift from season to season with electronic devices. For example, iPhone sales may ramp up during Christmas, as everyone in the United States buys the latest versions of iPhones as gifts for all their friends or families, while for other seasons, those sales might go down. So, Foxconn needs to be flexible to meet this shifting demand, which is why more than half of its workers are dispatch workers. However, Chinese labor law mandates that no more than 10 percent of a business's workers can be dispatch workers. Foxconn has a pattern of hiring substantially more dispatch workers than is legally allowed. Foxconn has been violating that labor law for years, if not decades, to maintain a flexible labor force and to protect itself from all labor responsibilities if a labor dispute happens. If Foxconn owes wages to dispatch workers, they can blame the problem on the workers' dispatch agency instead. In that way, Foxconn manages to avoid responsibilities regarding hiring and retaining labor in China.

Aside from the dispatch worker issue, Foxconn also utilizes vocational school students as free labor in China. Some Foxconn factories might have contractual relationships with local vocational schools teaching their students about electronic manufacturing or electronics engineering. Those vocational schools will send their students into Foxconn factories ostensibly as interns, using them as unpaid laborers for Foxconn under the guise of providing job experience. Foxconn puts these students onto the assembly line so they can assemble electronic devices for free. Foxconn workers also experience rampant sexual harassment, bullying, excessive overtime wage errors, and inadequate safety training. In addition, Foxconn does not have a good record of teaching its workers how to safely handle toxic chemicals. And aside from all these things, workers' suicides are rampant in Foxconn factories. Though the media largely stopped reporting these suicides from 2015 onwards, they are still happening every year.

During COVID-19 and the Zero-COVID policy in China, Foxconn implemented the so-called "closed loop production system" inside its Zhengzhou factory, which is located in central China. A closed-loop production system meant that workers had to work, eat, sleep, and live all inside the factory, 24 hours a day. Workers were essentially not allowed to leave the Zhengzhou factory premises during their contract. Foxconn installed security and barricades to prevent the workers from leaving. There was a lot of overtime, very little rest, and few safety procedures implemented on campus to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In fact, the closed-loop system exacerbated the transmission of the virus. In late 2022, an internal outbreak of COVID-19 flared up, and because of the closed-loop production system, many workers were getting infected, while Foxconn was covering up these issues. But we learned from workers' testimonies on social media that Foxconn was not providing adequate housing services to them. Because of the conditions, service providers refused to enter the compound to assist these workers. Trash started piling up, all the dorms became extremely unsanitary, and COVID-19 began to spread throughout the compound unchecked. These conditions led to a spontaneous uprising by Foxconn workers; they started breaking down barricades and going to management, with many demanding to leave their jobs. Many of them jumped through the barricades and started walking home, even if it took them a day or two to get there. That was how desperate the situation was. The local government even sent cadres to help fill Foxconn's supply chains, essentially having party members act as scabs, as workers began leaving en masse, with the company refusing to budge on basic demands at first.

Workers also began posting videos of this growing unrest at Foxconn on social media, and the videos went viral. Foxconn called in the local government for help, and the government sent in the police against workers who were just demanding basic human rights, lost wages, and better working conditions. Police dressed in all-white protective suits started beating up workers. This is what

companies in China typically do, and this is the modus operandi for any labor action in China.

This Foxconn uprising in Zhengzhou eventually snowballed into the A4 movement, which ended China's Zero-COVID policy. The uprising at Zhengzhou Foxconn was followed by a tragedy in Urumqi, where an entire apartment complex under lockdown due to COVID-19 caught on fire, and firefighters could not get into the building, so residents were asphyxiated and died in what was a preventable disaster. There was a lot of frustration with Zero-COVID policies, where people in big cities, like Beijing and Shanghai, had been locked in their residential compounds for months, unable to access basic necessities. Older residents were dying because they could not leave their homes to get to a hospital for conditions that needed treatment. All the government's hotlines were flooded during that period. All of these frustrations, plus the Zhengzhou Foxconn workers' uprising, led to the brief but monumental White Paper Movement that saw masses of people in the streets all over China. To me, this has been illuminative of the potential power labor has in China, where workers led the charge in this entire moment, and it shows that further down the line Chinese workers can be better organized and take action, and that there is hope that change can take place in China.

So, how can we build effective transnational solidarity with Foxconn and other Chinese factory workers? I use Foxconn as an example, but we can apply the following tactics to different companies and workforces. One way to build this solidarity is by hitting Foxconn where it hurts—by targeting its partners abroad. Foxconn manufactures many products for companies based in the United States, so we can target plenty of sites abroad to pressure Foxconn and amplify Foxconn workers' demands. We can take lessons from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in solidarity with Palestine. Many companies on the BDS list from Palestine are also manufacturing with Foxconn right now. For example, Google, Amazon, Siemens, and Hewlett-Packard all have contracts with Foxconn. Not only can we adopt lessons from BDS to support Chinese workers, but also combine our movements. Like the ongoing labor solidarity work for Palestine in the United States, trade unions can play a leading role in solidarity with Foxconn workers. Raising the issue of solidarity with Chinese workers in emergent union efforts like the Apple Retail Union, Amazon Labor Union, and Alphabet Workers Union, can also encourage U.S. workers to think more expansively about their organizing horizons. All of these unions can come together and say that they won't tolerate their employers manufacturing with a company that notoriously treats its workers so poorly. Unions in the United States can apply pressure on Foxconn, especially as the space to organize in China is rapidly narrowing because of increased repression.

Lastly, Foxconn's expansion into electric vehicle (EV) production may be another opportunity, as the United Auto Workers (UAW) is spearheading a drive to unionize EV plants. Foxconn's global partnerships may lead to more opportunities to connect struggles. For one, Foxconn recently bought an EV plant in Lordstown, Ohio. The UAW is quite active in Lordstown, and as we saw with their labor organizing and contract negotiations last year, the UAW has the ability to exert an immense amount of pressure on these car companies. This work is also important to provide a concrete alternative to the rampant anti-China nationalism of some American workers by emphasizing the organic interconnections between U.S. and Chinese capitalists on the one hand, and U.S. and Chinese workers on the other.

This Article is part of a special section on labor in China:
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• Gender and the Chinese Working Class, Zoe Zhao and Olia Shu
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