

Apple, Foxconn, and Chinese workers' struggles from a global labor perspective

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Abstract

To enrich the discussion of global labor, between 2010 and 2016, we studied Apple's value chain, Foxconn's mode of labor control, and Chinese workers' struggles. Through our fieldwork in China we also examined Apple's and Foxconn's responses to the spate of worker suicides, workers' resistance, the activism of scholar and student groups, and transnational justice campaigns. We conclude with reflection on global labor studies in light of the debates between Karl Polanyi's counter movement and Karl Marx's class-based struggle.

Keywords

Apple; Foxconn; Chinese workers; student and scholar activism; global labor studies

The Foxconn issue and our analytical approach

At about 8 a.m. on 17 March 2010, Tian Yu (her real name), a 17-year-old worker, went to the window of her fourth-story dorm room at the Foxconn factory and jumped. She survived and lives paralyzed from the waist down. Many more have followed Tian's attempt to end her life even as Apple fans consume new generations of electronic products as if there were no tomorrow. In 2010, 18 young rural migrant workers attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities in and near Shenzhen, resulting in 14 deaths; four survived with crippling injuries. The workers who attempted suicide ranged in age between 17 and 25 – in the prime of youth. This tragedy alarmed Chinese societies as well as the international community.

The responsibility for this tragedy and the larger tragedy of China's workers is not Foxconn's alone, although as the manufacturer of more than 50% of the world's electronic products, it is an enormous player and bears direct responsibility. The problems are by no means limited to Foxconn workers or to those producing Apple products. They extend far beyond the factory floor to the profit squeeze that Foxconn and other multinational producers as well as smaller companies face from such corporate giants as Apple, Microsoft, HP, Samsung, and SONY. This poses a huge challenge to a global labor movement, if there is to be one.

Foxconn stands out as a new form of global industrial capital because of its speed of capital accumulation and its scale of expansion to all regions of China and to 28 other countries on five continents, including its headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan. At its biggest production facility at Shenzhen Longhua in South China, during the spring 2010, more than 400,000 young workers including student workers – a new form of labor at Foxconn (and elsewhere) – were assigned to day and night shifts with frequent overtime on the assembly lines. Foxconn is a key node in the global production network where assembly and shipment of finished products to global consumers continue around the clock 365 days a year.

The tragic suicides emblematic of myriad labor problems at the workplaces that produce some of the world's most sought-after products, as well as the strength of a survivor like Tian Yu and the resistance of a new generation of Chinese workers, prompt us to dip into the Chinese and global context of international electronic capital. In this article, we seek to understand not only Foxconn's use of new forms of labor and its shop floor practices but also myriad forms of worker resistance, the role of the Chinese government and the responses of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) that ostensibly represents China's workers, as well as those of national and trans-border civil society to such pressing labor issues.

There are signs of an incipient social movement in support of Chinese workers in their struggle. How to connect the local labor struggles, including suicides and strikes, to the "new labor internationalism" as most recently advocated by Peter Waterman (2011), Peter Evans (2010), and Edward Webster (2008, 2010), among others? How to strengthen workers' power through an international solidarity campaign? From time to time, the debates on new labor internationalism or global social movement unionism call for new theorization of class or labor, or new approaches of labor organizing in order to expand the scope and increase the effectiveness of the movement.

Beverly Silver (2003) studied the world labor movement, arguing that the textile industry was the prototype of 19th century capitalism, and the auto industry the prototype of 20th century capitalism. What then will be the prototypical industry of the 21st century? With reference to our multi-year research since 2010, we ponder whether electronics is emerging as the prototype of 21st century capitalism, with Foxconn as its workshop exemplar, Apple its corporate icon, and Chinese workers the core producers. With more than one million workers in 30-plus sites run by Foxconn in China alone, while producing iPhones and a wide array of best-selling electronic products, Foxconn simultaneously produces a working class and provokes its struggles.

Much social science scholarship on class actions centers on struggles taken up by organized working-class organizations with the significant goal of transforming a capitalist and/or imperialist system. We, however, ask why a group of workers, small or large, which fights for their economic interests – indeed their very survival – at the point of production is not considered a class action. Our main argument is not that a robust working-class movement in China or globally is imminent. Instead, we consider the possibility and limitations of current labor actions, and assess how labor struggles that spring from the point of production can be connected to student and consumer campaigns that can impact international consciousness and the sphere of consumption.

This article attempts to engage with the current debates on labor internationalism and global labor movements. Specifically, we ask whether labor rights supporters (notably students and scholars) and Chinese workers are able to articulate intertwined factors of commodification and exploitation, to create a broader campaign, and to elevate it to a higher level in the global domain. In this dynamic process of research and social engagement, we observe that one recent change in Michael Burawoy's approach is a shift in his analysis from Karl Marx to Karl Polanyi. Polanyi emphasized market instead of capital, commodification instead of exploitation, and counter movement instead of class struggle. By introducing a "third-wave marketization scheme" to discern the neo-liberal turn of global capitalism since the mid-1970s, Burawoy's (2010, 2011) attitude towards Marxist labor process theory and class struggle of labor has become ambivalent. Could the two Karls, Karl Marx and Karl Polyani, meet? We pose this question not only to Michael Burawoy but to everyone through the lens of the contemporary China labor crises. We highlight that workers face life and death challenges in both production and social reproduction at a time of China's deepening incorporation into globalized capitalist production networks.

A collective investigation in China

Since the summer of 2010, faculty and students from 20 universities in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have formed a University Research Group on Foxconn in the wake of the suicides and reports of corporate abuses. Together with SACOM (Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior), a Hong Kong-based labor campaign group, researchers from Greater China, the United Kingdom, and the United States joined forces to conduct independent investigations of Foxconn's labor practices and production system throughout China.

In the first phase, between June and December 2010, we interviewed and surveyed workers and managers at major Foxconn factory complexes in nine cities, mainly in coastal China where the company's factories were then concentrated: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Kunshan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, Langfang, Taiyuan, and Wuhan. In the second phase, from March to December 2011, in addition to revisits to Foxconn factory complexes in Shenzhen and Kunshan, the giant production bases in the Pearl River Delta and the Yangzi River Delta regions, we investigated conditions in three newly opened Foxconn complexes in Chengdu, Chongqing, and Zhengzhou in the central and southwestern provinces into which Foxconn was expanding in the search for new sources of low-cost labor. In the third and final phase, from January 2012 to March 2016, we studied in-depth Foxconn plants in Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Zhengzhou; the latter two megafactories of Chengdu and Zhengzhou are exclusive Apple suppliers of iPads and iPhones, respectively.

During the two summers of 2010 and 2011, 14 investigators entered Foxconn to work as frontline workers to collect first-hand information about conditions in the plants and workers' lives. In all, we collected 2409 questionnaires through snowball sampling and conducted 500 interviews with former and current Foxconn workers and managers about their working and living conditions. Throughout the ongoing campaign since its conception, SACOM has contributed to a number of significant investigative reports and public statements to raise consumer concern at home and abroad.

Apple's success and its supply chain

Apple is reshaping the world including the spheres of consumption, identity, consciousness, work and play; what has been less noted is that it is simultaneously shaping a new Chinese working class. A few scholars from labor studies have lamented the decline of class and class power in the Marxist tradition. But we see the situation otherwise.

Apple and its chief supplier Foxconn have been quick to create conditions for the emergence of a working class in our digital era in new forms. The centralization and concentration of capital, with Chinese rural migrant workers providing the core labor force, have contributed to Apple's and other multinationals' success.

Apple is the shining symbol of American capital. If Apple's edge lies in technological innovation, design, style and marketing, its success is inseparable from its far-flung network of efficient suppliers, among which Foxconn is an important component maker and final assembler. The Apple story can also be read as a compelling tale of the dynamism of contemporary global capital: American, European, Japanese, and Korean technology multinationals all accelerated outsourcing of manufacturing to newly industrializing economies after the 2001 dot.com bubble, fostering the growth of contractors and smaller sub-assemblers in India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Mexico, Hungary and other low-cost countries. But it was and is, above all, China^[1] that secured the lion's share of investment and dominates the export market in the world (Chan, Pun and Selden 2013, 2015a).

The iPhone is the signature Apple product and the crown jewel of its empire. Apple sold one million units of the original digital music player iPod in two years, but it took just 74 days to reach that milestone with the introduction of the iPhone in 2007, and a sprint of three days to surpass sales of 1.7 million of the iPhone 4 in June 2010 (Apple 2010). During the same period, Foxconn workers toiled day and night to ramp up iPhone production as Foxconn was the sole manufacturer. With the launch of the iPhone 4S on 13 January 2012, it became available in over 90 countries making "this our fastest iPhone rollout ever," an Apple statement trumpeted (Apple 2012a). Eight months later, on 21 September, when Apple announced the launch of iPhone 5, it sold over five million units during the weekend, and CEO Tim Cook added that "we are working hard to get an iPhone 5 into the hands of every customer who wants one as quickly as possible" (Apple 2012b). In September 2015, Apple announced the biggest sale ever of more than 13 million new iPhone 6s and iPhone 6s Plus models just three days after launch (Apple 2015a).

Today, Apple competes head to head with Samsung, Xiaomi, and other smartphone brands on product design, marketing, cost, and delivery time to market. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of value for the iPhone between Apple and its suppliers. Apple's strength is well illustrated by its ability to capture an extraordinary 58.5% of the value of the iPhone. Particularly notable is the fact that labor costs in China account for the smallest share, only 1.8% or nearly US\$10, of the US\$549 retail price of the iPhone 4 (16GB model). Other major component providers such as Samsung, LG, and Toshiba earned slightly over 14% of the value of the product.

Apple is a major innovator and leader in the tablet computer market as well. When the iPad was released in the US in April 2010, Time magazine called it one of the "50 best inventions" of the year (McCracken 2010). Where profit margins are often in the single digits in the low-end

computing market, in 2011 Apple retained about 30% of the sales price of the US\$499 iPad (16GB), even more if it was sold through Apple's retail outlets or online store (Kraemer, Linden, and Dedrick 2011, 4). In contrast, labor cost for the iPad in China is estimated at only 1.6% or US\$8. Incredibly, Apple sold three million upgraded iPads in the first three days of its release in March 2012, making it absolutely dominant in global tablets (Apple 2012c).

Apple's success is best shown in its profit and market share of the most lucrative and widely sought electronic products. Between 2014 and 2015, Apple sold 231,218,000 iPhones, along with 54,856,000 iPads and 20,587,000 Macs. Apple's total revenues reached an unprecedented level of US \$233.7 billion, more than twice that of fiscal 2011 (US\$108.2 billion) (Apple 2015b, 24).

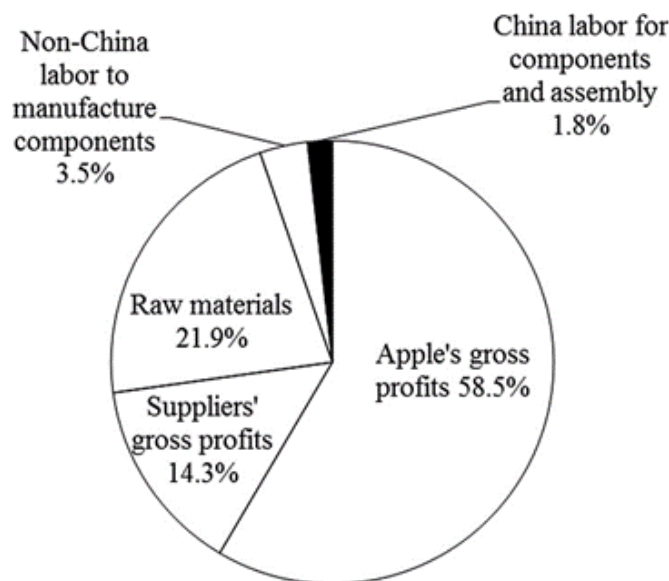


Figure 1. Distribution of Value for the iPhone, 2010.

Source: Adapted from Kraemer, Linden, and Dedrick (2011, 5).

To be precise, Apple through its products and effective promotion, creates a global consumer class and it is only through Foxconn and other providers that it creates a working class. In the wake of the Foxconn suicide wave in 2010, Apple tightened the noose on Foxconn by splitting iPhone orders with other suppliers such as Taiwanese-owned Pegatron to minimize reputational risks and to maximize profits.^[2] Faced with Apple's ruthless demands for products to meet demand, Foxconn was compelled to increase the already heavy pressures on workers for overtime, resulting in weeks of 60–70 hours of work (far beyond the normal 40-hour workweek and 36 hours of overtime per month permitted by Chinese law). During the peak production months, Foxconn also turned to growing numbers of student interns to meet its need for flexibility and cost competitiveness.

In summary, this section poses the first question for theorists of new labor internationalism who, cherishing Polanyi's concept of counter movement, seek to promote cross-class social movements involving people from different work and social positions. In what way might a middle-class consumer in the West or Asia align with a working-class producer in China in

struggles for worker justice? Obviously, without a rigorous analysis of class, moral appeals, and symbolic power, there can be no compelling answer. We will return to this question after considering labor politics in China.

Foxconn's empire and the Chinese state

The corporate growth of Foxconn in China since the late 1980s demonstrates a new phenomenon of capital expansion in terms of size of workforce, scale of factory compound, and number and location of factories across the nation. With a total workforce of over one million in China alone, Foxconn factory compounds employed in the range of 50,000 to more than 400,000 workers at the time of the suicide cluster in 2010, giving new meaning to the term mass production. The astonishing speed of capital expansion across geographic spaces was achieved through an alliance with the Chinese state especially at the local level. In particular, local states compete to have Foxconn set up new factory compounds in their territories so as to boost GDP (gross domestic product) growth under their jurisdiction and make resources available to local officials, to the extent that the factories systematically ignore labor law enforcement and undermine labor protection (Chan and Pun 2010; Pun and Chan 2012).

Foxconn's parent corporation, Hon Hai Precision Industry Company, was founded in Taipei in 1974. Over four decades, Foxconn successfully integrated production processes from raw material extraction to in-house and outsourced component manufacture to final assembly. This enabled it to become the world's largest manufacturer of "6C" products – computers, communications equipment, consumer digital (music players, cameras, game consoles and TVs), cars (automotive electronics), content (e-book readers), and health-care products. The company produces not only for Apple, but also Microsoft, IBM, Intel, Cisco, GE, Amazon, HP, Dell, Panasonic, SONY, Toshiba, Fujitsu, Nintendo, Sony Ericsson, Samsung, LG, Nokia, Motorola, Acer and Lenovo, a who's who of global electronic producers.

Foxconn's expansion is intertwined with the Chinese state's strategy of economic development and wealth accumulation through market-oriented reform and opening since the late 1970s, and more balanced coastal and inland development in recent years. In 1988, Foxconn launched a small processing factory in Shenzhen, with a workforce of 150 migrants from rural Guangdong, including 100 young women. In the 1990s, Foxconn diversified its production lines and locations. Major production clusters were in two coastal regions: the Pearl River Delta in the south and the Yangzi River Delta in the east. Since the 2000s, Foxconn looked to inland regions under China's "go west" program. In early 2011, the State Council approved plans for a regional project to link economic development between the two cities of Chengdu and Chongqing to further boost the economy of West China. Foxconn is the anchor for this project. Nowadays, Foxconn not only has manufacturing complexes in Shenzhen and all four major Chinese municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing, but also in 16 provinces throughout the country (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Foxconn China locations, 1974–2016.
Sources: Foxconn Technology Group corporate websites.

Foxconn is China's biggest industrial employer. After reaching its first 100,000 employees in 2003, it rapidly expanded to more than 700,000 in 2008. Its resilience in the economic downturn of 2008 is shown by the astonishing increase in the size of the labor force, reaching 1,000,000 in 2010. With new operations in northern, central, western, and southwestern regions, the number of Foxconn workers and staff continued to grow to 1.3 million in 2012, then hover at around 1 million in recent years. In Foxconn China, over 85% of employees are rural migrants between 16 and 29 years old, according to a mid-level human resources manager.^[3]

Foxconn's growth has been underwritten by the Chinese state, which from the 1980s began to encourage internal migrant labor on an ever expanding scale and presently provides massive subsidized land and infrastructural support as well as guaranteeing the supply and discipline of labor. The Foxconn experience challenges the belief that by deepening economic reform and

furthering the influx of foreign capital into China, legal protection for workers will be strengthened. As migrant workers, deprived of fundamental citizenship rights in the city, such as equal access to subsidized education for their children, they receive little labor protection and suffer high work pressure. This gives rise to desperation, at times even suicide, but also to myriad examples of collective resistance, albeit collective resistance that lacks a sustained institutional structure or broad social and political demands.

What Foxconn has created is not a working class in general, but an internal migrant working class, one that is undergoing a process of incomplete proletarianization (Pun and Lu 2010; Selden and Wu 2011; Chan and Selden 2014). As peasant-workers (*nongmingong*), they are deprived of basic rights in the city and at the workplace, and their reproduction remains somewhat dependent on or tied to the rural economy, in which their families normally contract a small plot of agricultural land from the rural collectives. The outcome of this specific Chinese political economy is the rise of a dormitory labor regime, which sustains the separation of workers' production and reproduction. The dormitory labor regime locates labor migrants between the rural and the urban areas as people who live and work in the city yet remain suspended between city and countryside.

In a nutshell, this poses a second question: how could such a migrant working class resist the combined power of powerful corporations and the Chinese state? We return to this question below after looking more closely at the organization and labor process of Foxconn.

The Foxconn empire: a centralized hierarchy

"Obey, obey, and absolutely obey!"
(Terry Gou, Foxconn CEO)

On entering the gate of Foxconn, workers immediately learn that they are part of CEO Terry Gou's industrial army. Inside the "Foxconn Empire," management organizes its labor process through a centralized hierarchical system in which production lines are administered by departments directly responsible to specific business units, business divisions, and ultimately business groups. "Leadership is being decisive. Leadership is a righteous dictatorship. Leadership is a battle between experimenting and practicality," says CEO Terry Gou. Senior leaders formulate the corporate development strategy and set annual revenue and profit goals. Middle management devises implementation plans and delegates responsibility. Production workers are subjected to supervision to complete the assigned work. Within the workshop, production operators and student interns face multiple layers of management from assistant line leaders, line leaders, team leaders, and supervisors. Foxconn forges a semi-militarized labor system, requiring absolute obedience from top to bottom of the chain of command.

Every Foxconn factory building and dormitory has security checkpoints with guards standing by 24 hours a day and capable of initiating total lockdown. The factory is entirely walled in and some walls even have barbed wire; security guards are positioned at each entrance; workers enter the factory after swiping an electronic staff card. Workers are required to pass inspection at each level of security. In addition, public and working areas in the factory have surveillance cameras.

The factory is strictly divided internally and each section has a guarded entrance. Even workers in different areas within the same building are not allowed to interact. Within the workshop workers are isolated from the outside world and in many workshops are forbidden to speak to one another during working hours. As one interviewee put it:

We are not allowed to bring cell phones or any metallic objects into the workshop. They are confiscated. If there is a metal button on your clothes or necklace, it must be removed, otherwise you won't be allowed in, or security officers will simply cut the metal button off.

A worker sharply commented, "Foxconn has its own force, just as a country has an army and police." According to our survey, 16.4% of workers had experienced beatings by security or managers. A female worker said: "If security decides that you have stolen a product, they won't ask about it. They'll beat you first, and after interrogating you, they will finally take you to the security station. Whatever happens, being taken to the security department means you will be beaten." Inside Foxconn, security usurps the role of the state police. A worker added: "Behind security is the boss!" Indeed, the security system is emblematic of the company's formidable power, and it is also frequently the cause of open conflicts. At the start of a shift, managers ask the workers: "How are you?" Workers must respond by shouting in unison, "Good! Very good! Very, very good!" This military-inspired drill is designed to instill discipline and obedience. Many workers explain that the first rule that each worker who enters Foxconn must remember is that "lower grades must obey higher grades absolutely."

At the Kunshan plant, a worker said this of the military-inspired factory routine:

During work, we cannot speak, nor can we use our cell phones. Before shift time a whistle sounds three times. At the first ring we must rise, and put our stools in order. At the second whistle we must prepare to work; some departments need special gloves or equipment. At the third whistle, we sit down and work, and our backs may not rest against the back of the chair.

The problem was not limited to Kunshan. In the Shenzhen Guanlan factory, some workers reported that while working they were constantly required to stand and even to maintain a military-style straddle position.

Any behavior that violates production discipline is subjected to harsh penalties. Punishment levels include warnings, demerits and dismissal. Aside from these listed punishments, other methods include cancellation of performance prizes, refusing promotion, and even methods not sanctioned in the "Employee Handbook" such as verbal abuse, copying "Terry Gou's Quotations," and public self-criticism. A worker recounted a situation in which a fellow worker was punished:

My friend was responsible for screwing screws onto cell phones. Once he missed a screw by mistake, which quality control caught. After the line supervisor learned about this, he said a few words then forced the worker to copy the CEO's Quotations 300 times.

Workers were painfully aware of their position within the company hierarchy: "Fate is not in your own hands but in your superior's." Workers recalled being punished when they talked on

the line, failed to catch up with the high speed of work, and made mistakes in work procedures. Several women workers whose job was to attach speakers to digital audio players described the humiliations imposed on workers who committed mistakes:

A girl is forced to stand at attention to read aloud a statement of self-criticism. She must be loud enough to be heard. Our line leader would ask if the worker at the far end of the workshop could hear clearly the mistake she has made. Oftentimes girls feel they are losing face. It's very embarrassing. Her tears drop. Her voice becomes very small ... Then the line leader shouts: "If one worker loses only one minute [failing to keep up with the work pace], then, how much more time will be wasted by 100 people?"

Posters on the Foxconn workshop walls and between staircases read:

Value efficiency every minute, every second.
Achieve goals otherwise the sun will no longer rise.
The devil is in the details.

Buyers of Foxconn products want their computers and iPhones fast to meet global demand. To meet tight shipping deadlines, Foxconn transfers the pressure to the frontline workers. This leads to constant pressure on Foxconn workers. Foxconn Zhengzhou, in Henan province in central China, assembles only one product, iPhones. A machine operator from the metal processing department said,

The daily production target is 6400 pieces. I am worn out every day. I fall asleep immediately after returning to the dormitory. The demand from Apple determines our lives. On the one hand, I hope I can earn higher wages. On the other hand, I can't keep working every day without a day off.

Throughout the research, workers repeatedly used language like: "We are machines," "We are faster than the machines," and "Work is monotonous and boring."

Foxconn implements a mixture of Taylorist and Fordist management methods and carries them to extremes. Foxconn breaks down the entire industrial process, identifies the crucial points, simplifies, formulates rules and standards, and controls the costs to maximize efficiency. CEO Terry Gou requires that control over operations be systematically planned to be like "an automatic camera," ensuring that each worker does not need any specialized knowledge to carry out standardized operations.

Many workers who could not endure the pressure and isolation quit within a few months. In a survey conducted outside of Foxconn Hangzhou, a woman worker who had just quit said, "The environment on the shopfloor is so cold, it depresses me. If I continue to work at Foxconn, I may commit suicide too."

To sum up, in this section we pose a third question: how is it possible to build a grassroots labor movement, and what can it achieve by scaling up, if workers choose to leave rather than getting organized to fight?

Worker resistance

The emergence of a new class of rural migrant workers in the service of transnational capital has made many increasingly aware of their shared positions and led to various forms of protest. The exploration of collective resistance from the ranks of the million-strong Foxconn workforce can help us gain a better understanding of the making of a new working class, their lives, their livelihoods, their hopes, and their responses to conditions in the factories and dormitories that define their world. “Where there is oppression, resistance lies” is a structural analysis; it is not just a political slogan. Suicide or quitting is not the only worker response to capital we have thus far observed.

Every day, many more workers, looking for a better life, come to Foxconn. What they find, however, is that they are “always yelled at,” their “self-respect is trampled mercilessly,” and that holding low wage jobs, there is the slimmest chance to advance under the fierce competition. If suicide is understood as an extreme form of labor protest chosen by some to expose an oppressive factory discipline, the dormitory-labor regime embodies a class structure and a socio-political space that condenses the sphere of production and daily reproduction. This institutional condition opens up the possibility for workers to recognize their common oppression, to stand up and defend their dignity and rights in the face of powerful corporate and government pressures (Pun, Chan and Chan 2010; Pun and Chan 2013).

Labor conflicts in Foxconn factories, unlike those in many smaller workplaces and construction sites, have not arisen from unpaid basic wages. However, disputes about fair pay, labor intensity and industrial speed-up, all intensified by production relocation from coastal to lower paid inland locations that require workers to move to remote geographical regions, have been acute. These have led to frequent worker protests, even when they were short-lived and confined to a single work- place. The weakness of workers vis-à-vis management is clear: the Chinese state has severely restricted labor rights while encouraging the formation of “trade unions” at the workplace that have consistently supported management in the face of worker actions (Lee 2007; Pringle 2011; Friedman 2014; Gallagher 2014; Chan, Pun and Selden 2016).

Work slowdown

At Shenzhen Longhua plant, for example, workers in the Technology Merging Service Business Group displaying a keen tactical sense, staged a slowdown precisely when production of a new model of e-book readers was ramped up and pressure for productivity increased. In Block F3, line leaders wore light-blue vests with bold Chinese characters proclaiming “loving heart” (ai xin) – a managerial culture of “love and care” in the aftermath of the 2010 suicide waves. But the competitive advantages of Foxconn’s electronics manufacturing are built on intensification of labor. In the face of speedups, which regularly accompany the unveiling of new models, on 20 October 2011 a group of 60 night-shift workers decided to go slow. The A1 Line was composed of 41 male and 19 female workers. Cao Yi (an alias) was a 21- year-old Hunan native who had been working in Foxconn for two years. His five closest friends from Hunan, Chongqing and Guizhou worked on the same assembly line. In a group interview, they complained vehemently,

We've been pushed like mad dogs to meet unattainable production targets. Our hands and our minds never rest. There was no way we could ever work fast enough [to meet the production quota], so we decided to ease off!

For the second time within a week the output quota had been adjusted upward. "This time ... up from 1800 to 2100 units; it's really too much." According to Yi, many others felt that the required workload was "absolutely unreasonable."

The A1 Line workers decided to slow down after the midnight meal break. Every worker on the line either actively or passively participated in the industrial action.

When it came to the early breakfast hour, Yi and the active workers celebrated their victory. However, coordination among several dozen workers had drawn supervisory attention and tighter surveillance. Workers were ordered to meet the high-speed production quota.

The workers decided to escalate their action: they began to make defective products. In the male dormitory, Yi and his brother-like friends spread word about a collective action, involving as many workers as possible so that no individual could be identified or singled out for punishment. They texted the "call for action" message through their cell phones, and had face-to-face discussions in several dormitory rooms. That Thursday night, many workers on the A1 Line intentionally left out a screw on the back casing. Others did not affix the bar code in the right place. The petty sabotage was soon discovered. As product quality was the highest priority, the line leader had to check each and every work procedure. The speed of the line eventually slowed down when the line leaders realized the seriousness of the workers' resistance. Workers had joined together to score a small victory. Yi and the others learned much about labor-management relations that was fundamentally at odds with the managerial discourse of love, care and mutual support. The shop floor had become a battlefield.

Group fighting, riots, strikes, and road blockages

During our field studies, group fighting broke out in Foxconn factories in several regions. Under high pressure working and living conditions, such as queuing up to enter the security machine at the workshop to clock their cards, to take meals within limited time, conflicts repeatedly erupted. Arguments between assembly line workers and quality controllers, conflicts between materials providers and line workers, quarrels between line managers and production workers, all gave rise to uncontrollable anger, which sometimes led to group fighting.

When Foxconn opened its operation in Chengdu, provincial capital of Sichuan, in October 2010, the local government offered free labor recruitment services and provided multistory dormitories among many other incentives. The Xi'nan male worker dormitory zone, located 2 km from the Foxconn Chengdu manufacturing complex, houses 20,000 people. Each dormitory building has 18 floors, with 24 rooms per floor and eight workers per room. In January 2011, a worker riot erupted there.

On the night of 6 January, one of the two elevators in the dormitory was out of order. Thousands of workers, after an exhausting 12-hour shift, had to climb the stairs to their rooms where they

found that there was no hot water for showers. That month, the average temperature was between 1° and 5° C (33° and 41°F), and the frequent lack of electricity and water had been distressing. Several workers angrily ran to the dormitory roof, destroyed the water tank, switched off the power, and cut off the entire water supply system. Workers from the whole block of dormitories were shouting as they rushed out of their rooms to find out what was going on. Workers threw glass bottles, plastic basins, trash bins, stools and fire extinguishers from the upper floors to the ground below. By 10 p.m., the police had arrested more than 20 workers to halt the riots.

The rioting workers presented management with clear demands, but management branded their behavior “senseless.” Behind their action lay deep frustration with dormitory management and living and working conditions. Could the company producing the most sophisticated products in the world not provide electricity and hot water for its workers? In addition to the poor living environment, workers protested very low wages: the basic monthly pay was 950 Yuan (US\$149), far from the promised 1,600 Yuan (US\$250). Foxconn justified the difference, saying that the latter referred to “comprehensive income,” that is, the basic wage plus overtime premiums and bonuses (if any). Interviewed workers felt that they had been “tricked to work for Foxconn.”

Foxconn Chengdu workers who passed the six-month probation were eligible for a pay raise. On 2 March 2011, more than 200 workers from the Super Hong Zhun Business Group clashed with their supervisor over job evaluation and wage adjustment for those who had passed probation. Refusing to work after lunch, they occupied the B22 factory canteen and demanded to negotiate with senior managers. When their demand was turned down, at 3:30 p.m., they marched out of the canteen to gather at the main entrance of the plant (Zone C). Their goal was to draw public attention to their grievances in order to increase pressure on management. More than a dozen traffic police and security officers quickly converged on the scene. Only then did senior managers invite the worker representatives to “sit down and talk.” Mr Chen, the corporate human resources manager who mediated the dispute, later recalled that the protesting workers responded that they had no representatives, “we’re all leaders.” Concerned about retaliation, such as blacklisting or firing, the workers tried to protect each other in a collectivity with no visible leaders.

The power of Foxconn workers was displayed in this action involving more than 200 workers: they timed the action to the strategic moment when Apple announced the debut of iPad 2. The Chengdu plant was – and is – the crucial supplier of iPads for the world. In the global production chain, Foxconn has to guarantee its clients on-time delivery of quality products. Under this circumstance, the company executives bowed to worker demands, agreeing to increase some wages and not discipline rebel workers.

In short, the buyer-driven global supply chain, the dormitory labor regime, and the Chinese state policies in support of the company all contribute to growing labor resistance. Foxconn workers on numerous occasions have fought to expand their rights in the production sphere and to protest their inferior status as peasant-workers in the reproduction sphere. And in several instances they have won limited victories such as wage increases, improved dormitory conditions, or reversing impossible production targets. The combined power of the company, the local state, and the unions, however, have prevented breakthroughs in terms of securing the right to strike, to

collective bargaining and the formation of independent unions that might make it possible to extend and sustain worker rights.

Apple's corporate image: "care and commitment"

How has Apple responded in response to Foxconn worker suicides and subsequent worker actions? In February 2011, Apple released its Supplier Responsibility Progress Report to show the remedial measures taken by Foxconn in the aftermath of suicides. Apple's auditing team was quick to applaud Foxconn's emergency responses (Apple 2011, 19):

The team commended Foxconn for taking quick action on several fronts simultaneously, including hiring a large number of psychological counselors, establishing a 24-hour care center, and even attaching large nets to the factory buildings to prevent impulsive suicides.

What is striking about these "remedial measures" is that all were put in place only after the negative publicity that followed the suicide cluster. Moreover, none of them address such core issues as speedup, illegal levels of compulsory overtime work, and dangerous and unsafe conditions in Foxconn factories. And none even mention Apple's own direct responsibility in demanding immediate delivery of new models.

In this self-policing – or more accurately public relations – mode of corporate social responsibility, Apple failed to address the issues that arose from its own ordering practices and that contributed directly to blatant rights violations by supplier factories. And Apple is not alone. Apple and other leading corporate members of the global electronic industry association moved swiftly to resolve the public relations crisis in a quick fix, while ignoring the fundamental production conditions that gave rise to the structural problems of labor relations, conditions that were the product of its outsourcing and purchasing policies (Drahokoupil, Andrijasevic, and Sacchetto 2016). The fundamental problems remain intractable, not least because calls for reform have been accompanied by continued pressure from Apple to meet high production quotas and to accept lower payment for its products.

In early 2012, Apple became a member of the Fair Labor Association (FLA), hastily commissioning a "special voluntary audit" of its supply chain, beginning with Foxconn in China. Apple characteristically turned to a third-party audit in a bid to influence public opinion. Conveying a public image of neutrality and probity, the FLA, whose board includes representatives from Nike and agribusiness giants, is funded by the corporations that comprise its core membership and dominate its decision-making. Its mission, from our perspective, is to convey an image of principled management while serving the interests of its members.

Apple's success is predicated on its ability to provide innovative products to meet ever-changing consumer demand. Tracking demand worldwide, it adjusts production forecasts daily. As Apple CEO Tim Cook puts it, "Nobody wants to buy sour milk" (quoted in Satariano and Burrows 2011). Streamlining and controlling the global supply chain on the principle of "competition against time" is Apple supply-chain management's goal. Our studies show that compressed delivery time of new products has repeatedly taken precedence over worker health and safety and rights protection, at times with tragic consequences. As a result, whatever the stepped up audits,

the tremendous pressure by Apple on suppliers such as Foxconn to cut corners continued and intensified.

Foxconn's "new" promise

Following the suicide wave, did Foxconn managers take meaningful actions to assure the welfare of workers? The 2011 statement of the Foxconn Global Social and Environmental Responsibility Committee reads (FTG 2011, 1):

Foxconn renewed its commitment to "respect employees, ensure continuous improvement, contribute to the well-being of society, and achieve sustainability." In pursuing transformation of its management style, Foxconn has raised its standards in employee fringe benefits, provided additional recreational activities, and assisted employees in coping with workplace stress.

From 1 June 2010, Foxconn raised the basic wage of production workers in Shenzhen to 1200 Yuan (US\$190) a month, that is, 9% above the adjusted local minimum statutory wage (which came into force from 1 July) (Shenzhen Government 2010). For the first time, Foxconn offered a wage above the legal minimum. At the same time, Foxconn declared that it would reduce excessive overtime from some 100 hours per month – that is, three times the national legal limit for overtime – to the statutory level of no more than 36 hours overtime a month. But the company has persistently failed to meet the goals of guaranteeing a comfortable wage and a work-life balance.

To offset part of the increased wages, from early 2011, Foxconn management began to deduct 40 yuan (US\$6.5) per month for the bunk-bed space in the factory dormitory. As of 2014, the monthly rent was raised to 150 yuan (US\$24). Living in the dormitory is no longer free of charge. What the company gave with one hand, it took away with another in the form of rising costs for rent.

Government statistics show that in 2014, Chinese rural migrant workers' average wage was 2864 yuan/month (including overtime premiums) (US\$450), a 9.8% increase from the previous year (NBS 2015, Table 9). This was largely the result of annual increases in local minimum wages throughout the country in a bid to stimulate domestic consumption. In 2014, a Foxconn new worker in Shenzhen earned 1800 yuan per month (US\$285) – still short of the promised 2000 yuan basic monthly pay (US\$317) made by the management in the wake of the 2010 suicide waves (FTG 2010, 1).

Worse still, Foxconn translates production requirements for fast time-to-market and high quality into increased work pressure and longer hours. In a rare reference to the pressures that Apple and its competitors apply, Foxconn CEO's Special Assistant Louis Woo explained the company's perspective on overtime in an April 2012 American media program (quoted in Schmitz 2012):

The overtime problem – when a company like Apple or Dell needs to ramp up production by 20% for a new product launch, Foxconn has two choices: hire more workers or give the workers you already have more hours. When demand is very high, it's very difficult to suddenly hire 20%

more people. Especially when you have a million workers – that would mean hiring 200,000 people at once.

Woo's statement indicates that, when faced with soaring demand from Apple, Dell, and other electronics brands, pressures that frequently coincide during the Christmas holiday rush, Foxconn's first response is to impose compulsory overtime on its existing labor force. However, it also tries to hire more people to respond seamlessly to corporate demands for rush orders. Recruitment through vocational schools is an efficient way to pick up tens of thousands of new low cost workers at once, youth who are purportedly hired in the name of skills training and school-business cooperation (Chan, Pun and Selden 2015b).

From trans-border to global labor campaigns

Beginning in May 2010, a number of Chinese students and scholars dedicated themselves to understanding the root causes of Foxconn suicides. On 18 May 2010, nine mainland Chinese and Hong Kong academics issued an open letter calling on Foxconn and the Chinese government to do justice to the younger generation of migrant workers. The statement reads, painfully (Chan and Pun 2010):

The path ahead is blocked, and the road to retreat is closed. Trapped in this situation, the new generation of migrant workers faces a serious identity crisis and, in effect, this magnifies psychological and emotional problems. Digging into this deeper level of our societal and structural conditions, we come closer to understanding the “no way back” mentality of these Foxconn employees.

Hence, the scholars argued that throwing their bodies from dormitory buildings is an act of frustration and defiance. In their defiant deaths the workers call on the Chinese nation – and international society – to wake up before more lives are sacrificed. We argue that in the absence of effective channels of expression and association, the suicide jumpers chose to sacrifice their lives as a means of accusation. But neither in China nor internationally should anyone have to make sacrifices of this kind. Was it suicide or murder? In our view, the suicide was tantamount to murder.

In late May, our research team and SACOM created blogs dedicated to the Foxconn worker victims and their families, with the theme song “Grief” spreading quickly throughout the web. Across the straits, in June, more than 300 Taiwanese issued another open statement and held a press conference to condemn Foxconn management and its brutality toward mainland workers (Lin and Yang 2010). On the basis of these two open statements linking scholars and students from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, a large-scale collective investigation of Foxconn began in the summer of 2010.

SACOM, the Hong Kong-based labor group formed by students and scholars concerned about labor rights issues in mainland China, is purposeful in launching the trans-border campaign in support of workers. In our interview, Debby Chan, the Project Officer of SACOM (2009–2012) commented, “Foxconn is not the only company to be blamed. The dire plight of the workers

could not be sustained at Foxconn without the connivance of its major client, Apple.” Within two years, SACOM released six investigative reports on Apple and Foxconn (see Table 1).

Table 1. SACOM investigative reports, May 2010–September 2012.

Date	Title
20 Sep 2012	New iPhone, old abuses: Have working conditions at Foxconn in China improved?
30 May 2012	Sweatshops are good for Apple and Foxconn, but not for workers
24 Sep 2011	iSlave behind the iPhone: Foxconn workers in central China
6 May 2011	Foxconn and Apple fail to fulfill promises: Predicament of workers after the suicides
13 Oct 2010	Workers as machines: Military management in Foxconn
25 May 2010	Dying young: Suicide and China’s booming economy

Sources: SACOM (2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b).

In response to the spate of suicides at Foxconn, SACOM launched the “Global Day of Remembrance for Victims of Foxconn” on 8 June 2010, the date of Foxconn’s annual shareholder meeting in Hong Kong. It also helped facilitate a Concerned International Scholars’ Appeal in order to mobilize international support (CIS 2010).

The Netherlands-based GoodElectronics and makeITfair joined SACOM in the emergent global campaign targeting Apple during the summer of 2010. Both GoodElectronics and makeITfair mobilized partners in the network to protest against Foxconn and its largest buyer, Apple, among other tech brands. At that time, labor groups in Mexico, Germany, and Switzerland organized actions to demand that Foxconn reform its military-style management method and respect workers’ rights. Other labor groups in the United States held protests in San Francisco, Boston, and New York to demand justice for the Foxconn victims. In addition, the US-based United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and the LabourStart launched petitions against Apple and Foxconn calling for an end to the abuses. Tens of thousands of people supported these actions through petitions, financial support and demonstrations.

When Foxconn announced its expansion and relocation plan in mid-2010, SACOM determined to track working conditions in the company’s new plants in inland provinces. In 2011 and 2012, SACOM investigated the Foxconn iPad factory in Chengdu and the Foxconn iPhone factory in Zhengzhou. Media coverage of the “sweatshop” working conditions at Foxconn was remarkable. The plight of Foxconn workers was widely reported by AFP, BBC, Reuters, the Guardian, the Independent, Al Jazeera, the Daily Mail, the Age, Spiegel Online, the Huffington Post, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and dozens of international media outlets, which was soon cross-posted and circulated in Hong Kong and mainland Chinese newspapers.

Concluding remarks: assessing the future of the global labor movement

China’s new working class, comprised overwhelmingly of rural migrant workers, faces distinctive forms of exploitation associated with the combined power of the corporation, the government and the unions. What are the implications for world labor when more than a score of Foxconn workers killed themselves in 2010, and when a wave of protests, riots, and strikes occurred in their wake at the Foxconn workplaces and far beyond?

Michael Burawoy (2011) in his article “uncompromising pessimism” offers neither a theoretical

analysis nor a compelling approach grounded in the lived experience of the workers; by contrast, he has produced important insights in his earlier field research on South African, Hungarian, and Russian workers. The *Global Labour Journal* has provided a venue for heated debates over labor inter-nationalism, global trade unionism, and national and global labor movements (Munck 2010). A major divide, if a false one, has appeared between Peter Evans' global counter-hegemonic movement calling for a global labor movement (Evans 2008, 2010), and Burawoy's critique of a "false optimism" inherent in Polanyi's concept of a counter movement to forces of commodification. Burawoy (2010, 2011) reaffirms Antonio Gramsci's call for "pessimism of the intellect" and "optimism of the will." Fierce as the debate has been, we found it unhelpful for gauging the struggle of China's embattled workers, which we present here through the lens of a constellation of forces spearheaded by Apple, the world's richest tech corporation, and Foxconn, the world's biggest corporate workshop. Equally problematic is that he prioritizes "nature" over labor in the 21st century struggles against the "third-wave marketization." Looking at Apple's products and Foxconn's production regime in China and elsewhere, it is clear that both nature and labor are at the root of global capital accumulation. Hence, our view is that the faster the process of capital accumulation, the more extensive the scale of expropriation of nature and subsumption of labor. Surprisingly, given his important contributions to labor studies, the concept of class in relation to capital seems lacking in Burawoy's discussion of third-wave marketization.

Labor itself is virtually missing from Burawoy's advocacy of an unspecified global counter movement to the "third-wave marketization" that he perceives emerging from the oil crisis and subsequent neoliberalism that has gained momentum since the 1970s. Given Burawoy's (2010, 301) earlier insightful critique of Polanyi's thesis, which "shifts from exploitation to commodification, from production to markets, and from classes to society", it is surprising that he appears to have moved away from an analysis rooted in class. In the absence of an analysis of class, specifically an analysis of the specificity of class formations under concrete historical conditions, there will never be an emancipatory labor movement whether at local, national, or global levels. The essential task is to show how the life experience of commodification in the market, both as a laborer (a seller of labor power) and a consumer, can be linked with that of the critical understanding of the specific forms of exploitation of workers in the production sphere. Could the two Karls – Karl Polanyi and Karl Marx – finally come together and complement each other? In fact, class-based labor struggles are shaped not only by the particular forms of exploitation that workers experience; they are also the product of an epoch in which demographic change is creating labor shortage [4] and pressures for improved conditions for labor, which could play to the advantage of a new generation of workers. In short, labor struggles are shaped by class factors as well as labor market factors. This means that, for a member of the working class, the experiences of commodification in the market, the sale of labor power, and alienation and exploitation on the production line, can be connected. This is because labor as a commodity in the market is derived from the logic of capital accumulation rooted in the relations of production.

In pointing to the character of the new Chinese working class, we seek to highlight the specific interface of labor, capital, and the state that frames labor conditions in contemporary China. We view labor struggles as early signs of class consciousness that could lead to a possible emergent labor internationalism in which the resistance of Chinese workers gained the support of students

and scholars, workers, and consumers in the United States and throughout the developed world who are associated as consumers with major electronic products manufactured in China.

To be sure, corporate and state strategies to date have effectively restricted a nascent worker and pro-labor movement to the local level. Nevertheless, we see the proliferating labor struggles as simultaneously rooted in local terrain and driven by forces of global capital and the Chinese state. These labor struggles, while thus far dispersed, may have the potential to elevate to national or even global levels.

Can a moral appeal to humanity and a universal call to guarantee fundamental labor rights be effectively linked to an emerging class-oriented movement centered on Chinese workers?

Workers are protesting and striking, support groups such as SACOM and other pro-labor groups are issuing statements, engaged scholars are analyzing the structures of domination that drive the intensified labor control and resistance. More mainland Chinese university students are preparing to work on production lines at Foxconn so as to understand the complexity of the life-world of workers' hardship and struggles. But the growing labor struggles, and their significant connections with conscientious consumer campaigns, however, have yet to materialize. The class barriers dividing consumers and producers in the case of Apple products have not been overcome. A cross-class Polanyian counter movement has not been realized.

Indeed, campaigns that rest exclusively on appeals to humanity or moral claims will not be sustainable. International attention and media exposure have been fading, except briefly in times of crisis. In our assessment, class analysis in the classic Marxist sense is by no means obsolete. The core question remains whether Foxconn workers and their counterparts in factories throughout China will succeed in strengthening their protests as part of a global labor movement. That would of course require not only the growth of Chinese labor struggles but labor struggles and support movements centered on the developed countries as well as the Global South.

Notes

1. The "Made in China" products are actually assembled in China with labor provided in China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, and other countries.
2. Pegatron, newly founded in Taipei in 2008, provides electronic and computing manufacturing services to Apple and other brands. It currently has three large facilities in Shanghai, Suzhou (Jiangsu Province) and Chongqing.
3. The authors and our researchers conducted interviews with Foxconn workers, student interns, managers, teachers in charge of internship programs, and local government officials across China between 2010 and 2016. The authors keep the transcripts and field notes in strict confidence.
4. Demographic changes have slowed the growth of the working-age population at a time of general ageing, potentially increasing the marketplace bargaining power of workers in China. But employers are not going to sit idly by. Recent research has shown that "student interns," who are recruited from vocational schools and paid below minimum wages in the name of "internship," have become a new source of contingent labor. The sale of the students' labor power as a commodity and the super exploitation of student workers is the joint product of the Chinese state and capital.

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