



Apple's Child Labour Issues Worsen

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Apple said that **91 children under the age of 16 were discovered to be working last year** in ten Chinese factories owned by its suppliers.

By comparison, in 2009, Apple said eleven underage workers had been discovered.

"In recent years, Chinese factories have increasingly turned to labour agencies and vocational schools to meet their workforce demands," said Apple's report.

"We learned that some of these recruitment sources may provide false IDs that misrepresent young people's ages, posing challenges for factory management," it added.

In response, Apple said it had "intensified" its search for workers under 16, the minimum legal working age in China. In one factory it had found 42 children working on the production line and has now terminated its contract. Apple said it decided that the management "had chosen to overlook the issue and was not committed to addressing the problem."

In other cases, Apple said it had been "aggressive" in returning children to their families and had forced factories to cover the costs of education for the underage workers for six months, or until they reached 16, "whichever is longer".

Apple is the only major technology company to audit its supply chain and publish the results. Of the suppliers that Apple visited last year "more than 40pc stated that Apple was the first company ever to have audited their facility for social responsibility compliance," it said.

However, it does not name individual suppliers, which makes it impossible for outside scrutiny of the firms involved. By contrast, Dell and HP both publish lists of who they buy their components from.

For 2010, Apple's Supplier Responsibility report reveals a patchy record.

On the one hand, Apple has succeeded in auditing more of its factories than ever before, a total of 127, compared with 102 in 2009. On the other, a smaller share of those factories are meeting Apple's guidelines in some key areas.

While the situation overall is broadly improving, or at least not deteriorating, less than a third of Apple's suppliers are now meeting its requirements on working hours. Last year, 46pc were compliant and the year before, 59pc.

That means that two-thirds of the factories which supply components for Apple's range of products, or who assemble them, make their workers toil for more than 60 hours a week and do not give their workers one day of rest per seven working days.

"Seventy-six facilities had records that indicated workers had exceeded weekly working-hour limits more than 50pc of the time," Apple said.

Likewise, fewer factories (72pc) are now compliant with health and safety standards and only 57pc of factories are compliant with codes to prevent workplace injury. Apple's audits uncovered 37 "core" violations in 2010, up from 17 in 2009.

This year, however, Apple did display some teeth in dealing with its suppliers, firing three of them. Aside from the company employing child labour, one other was fired for trying to bribe Apple's auditors and a third had repeatedly falsified its payroll records and lied about it to Apple.

Apple has come under fire in China as a "sweatshop brand" which has "based its mass production on subcontractors, without proper protections in the workplace". A report compiled by 36 environmental groups, led by the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE) and Friends of Nature, said at least 200 Chinese have been sickened by working for Apple's suppliers.

The NGOs conducted a nine-month study of working conditions at seven Apple subcontractors across several Chinese provinces, gathering damning statements from workers on the production line.

Apple also said it was "disturbed and deeply saddened" by the spate of suicides at Foxconn, one of its most important suppliers. The company sent Tim Cook, its chief operating officer, to Shenzhen in the wake of the suicides and commissioned an independent review of more than 1,000 workers.

It said it had asked Foxconn to provide more counselors and that the Taiwanese firm had started to move factories inland so that workers would be "closer to their home provinces". It said it would continue to work with Foxconn.

It also admitted that 137 workers at Wintek, another supplier, had been poisoned by n-hexane, a chemical used to clean the screens of iPods and iPhones. Apple said it had asked Wintek to cease using the chemical.

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