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Apple, HP and Dell among companies responsible for 'electronic sweatshops', claims report

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The world's largest technology companies, including Apple, HP and Dell, have created a network of "electronic sweatshops" in China and should bear responsibility for a string of suicides among workers, a new report has claimed.

By Malcolm Moore, Shanghai

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As Apple celebrated record profits, and moved closer to becoming the world's most valuable company with a market capitalisation of over \$360 billion, China Labor Watch (CLW), a New York-based rights group, presented its evidence about the true cost of our obsession with technology

China Labor Watch sent investigators to work on the production lines of ten major Chinese electronics factories, which assemble products for Apple, Dell and HP as well as Sony, Nokia, Motorola and many others.

Over an eight month period, the investigators also interviewed over 400 workers about conditions that they claim were not only unethical, but often also illegal under Chinese law.

Nine of the ten factories allegedly forced their workers to work as many as 40 extra hours of overtime each week and nine paid a basic wage that "did not provide workers with the means to afford basic living costs".

The report claimed that "on one HP assembly line, workers were required to complete their assigned task every three seconds, while continually standing over a ten-hour period".

One of the factories listed in the report allegedly had such "militant" bosses that workers were forbidden to speak during their 12-hour shifts. Some others are said to have made it impossible for workers to use the bathroom.

"Left to themselves, multinational companies and Chinese manufacturers will continue to pursue business and labour practices that ultimately abuse Chinese workers," the report said, noting that the entire industry is unregulated and that Apple only pays £3.99 to manufacture a £600 iPhone, leaving factories little option but to make profits by exploiting workers.

Earlier this week, another employee at Foxconn, the world's largest electronics manufacturer was found dead at the company's sprawling factory in the southern city of Shenzhen, where over 250,000 workers assemble gadgets for almost every major electronics company.

Last year, a suicide cluster at Foxconn claimed 14 lives and prompted intense scrutiny of the inhuman working practices in the electronics industry.

However, China Labour Watch said the industry had failed to change its ways and was still ruthlessly putting larger profits above a minimum standard of welfare for workers.

"Foxconn is not the only company that should bear responsibility for worker suicides: Apple, HP, Dell and other international companies should also be held responsible, as their goal of profit maximisation comes at the cost of the workers' wages and sub-optimal working conditions," the report argued.

In some factories, it is alleged, workers were not given contracts, or pay slips, and while there was a trade union in one factory, operated by Quanta, the world's largest laptop maker, "workers did not know if there are any representatives in the union or if any workers had ever had a meeting with the union".

One of the factories named in the report, run by MSI, a Taiwanese firm, said: "We admit that it is very common in the electronic industry to have long overtime hours, and we admit our factories in China need to take a long hard look at themselves." Another one, run by Tyco, said it disputed the accuracy of the report and accused China Labor Watch of not interviewing a representative sample. "We have a high turnover rate of workers in this industry," said a spokesman.

Apple, Dell, HP and Nokia did not return requests for a comment. In annual reports earlier this year, Apple revealed that child labour at

its suppliers in China is worsening, with 91 children under the age of 16 being found in factories making Apple goods. Dell, meanwhile, admitted that only 46 per cent of its suppliers were following its rules.

Sony and Motorola both said they were committed to improving working conditions, but declined to comment further. "Many of these companies state that they are implementing far-reaching reforms, but we have yet to see any evidence of this," said Li Qiang, the executive director of CLW.

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