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Treat Human Beings as Humans

Zhang Lijia

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The suicides among workers at Foxconn and the ongoing strikes at Honda and other foreign-owned factories are cries for help. Within its Shenzhen plant, Foxconn seems to provide everything its 400,000 workers can hope for: canteens, clinics, a library, entertainment and sports facilities.

It reminds me of the state-owned rocket factory I worked for in the 1980s which provided plenty of socialist welfare but also controlled our lives: no lipstick, no permed hair, and no dating within three years of entering the factory.

Have the work conditions improved over the years? Yes, probably, within the state-owned enterprises that still hold China’s key industries. The labor intensity in those, though much increased, isn’t nearly as bad as in some of the private sectors. Over the years, foreign and private investment have turned China’s coastal regions into the factories — and often the sweatshops — of the world.

Foxconn workers are allowed only a few minutes for toilet breaks and are barely permitted to talk to their colleagues. To keep the production line running, they have to work 12-hour shifts. All workers have to sign a statement, saying they “voluntarily” work over-time. The truth is: without the overtime payment, they can hardly survive on their basic salary of 900 yuan. No one at Foxconn has any time to use amenities at the plant.

The local government often tolerates certain violations of labor laws because of the revenue the factories bring in to the region — they “keep one eye open and one eye shut,” as the Chinese would say.

Compared with their predecessors, the new generation of workers are better educated, less financially desperate; they are more worldly, savvy with the Internet, and have higher expectations from life. Li Hai, a 19-year-old from central China’s Hunan province was the 11th worker who leapt to his death from a Foxconn building this year. In a suicide note to his family, he said the gap between reality and his expectations was too big and he had lost hope in life.

These workers, more aware of their rights, are no longer willing to be treated like machines. It was not entirely accidental that the Honda strikes took place when the spate of suicides at Foxconn sent shock waves across the factory floors in China. As discussed in chat rooms on the internet, some argued that it would be better to put up a fight than to take one’s life.

As someone who had endured the demoralizing existence at a factory, I know how these protesting workers feel. Their motivation may be economic, but in a broad sense, they are also demanding to be respected as human beings.

Zhang Lijia is author of Socialism is Great! A Worker’s Memoir of the New China. This post is an expanded version of an essay that appeared at the New York Times “Room for Debate” blog.

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