

Australia: Union enforces sweatshop conditions at Foxconn's Sydney plant

By our reporters
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Behind the backs of the workers, an Australian trade union has imposed a workplace agreement maintaining sweatshop conditions at Foxteq, a subsidiary of the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn, in the Sydney suburb of Rydalmere. Angry workers condemned the union's role at a recent meeting organised by both the union and management, where the deal was presented as a *fait accompli*, with workers given no right to read the document or vote on it.

Some Foxteq workers courageously spoke out to the media last November, exposing the fact that the company's entire workforce consisted of casual employees engaged by Westaff, a labour hire company. Their livelihoods were constantly precarious, with the chance of being offered work each day dependent on how many computers they had helped assemble or pack the day before.

The young workers, mostly from Asian backgrounds, assembled IBM and other computers, and packed Hewlett-Packard computers, which were sold to prominent corporate and government customers, including banks and the Department of Defence.

In response to these revelations, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) told the media last November, and assured its members at other Sydney factories, that it would intervene on behalf of the Foxteq workers. This week, the union boasted that it had struck a deal with Foxteq and labour hire company, Resco, which has just taken over Westaff. AMWU state secretary Tim Ayers said the union had been "working hard behind the scenes" to reach an agreement that "offers a transition from medieval practices to a modern manufacturing workplace".

In reality, a sweetheart deal has been cooked up between management and the union to retain essentially the same conditions, which will now be

enforced by the union. At the union-management factory meeting, workers were told that the company would offer permanent part-time or full-time positions to workers with six months' service or more. But there was no guarantee that workers would not be laid off before they qualified. Moreover, the hourly rate of pay was reduced to \$15.93 for permanent work, down from \$19.40 for casuals.

When the union representative was asked by one of the workers to explain who gave him permission to speak on their behalf, given that no worker at Foxteq was a member of the AMWU, he answered that it was part of collective bargaining. Management has subsequently sought to discourage workers from accepting permanent positions on the basis that they would receive reduced wages.

Hewlett-Packard has welcomed the agreement, telling the *Sydney Morning Herald* that it would "stabilise work schedules" for the computers it obtains from Foxteq.

Foxconn, Foxteq's parent, is a giant electronics manufacturer that employs up to 900,000 workers in China and many thousands in other countries, including India. In China, its oppressive conditions became notorious after 13 suicide attempts by workers between January and June 2010 (see: "Foxconn suicides highlight China's sweatshop conditions"). In India, where similar conditions prevail, Foxconn workers last year went on strike, demanding wage increases, the "regularisation" of contract workers, and union recognition, but the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) called off the strike without any of the workers' demands being met (see: "India: Victimized Foxconn and BYD workers speak out").

Foxteq workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that their conditions remain little changed, and they face

new speed-up pressures. The only difference is that, where workers were previously notified by text message as late as 10 p.m. if they were to work the following day at 6 a.m., they are now notified by 4 p.m. If called in to work, they are guaranteed a day's pay, whereas previously they could be sent home after a few hours.

One female worker, who has been employed at Foxteq for three years, said: "I'm not happy working there. Sometimes I feel a lot of pressure because the company has changed the targets. Every day now we have to make 300 units. Before, every line had six people, and now we have only three or four.

"Every day we have to wake up early and prepare to work, but we don't know how long we are going to work, so we can't plan anything. This isn't fair. The only thing that has changed is that now we are guaranteed a day's work. Before, in one week, I only worked one and a half days. That's very hard financially."

Another worker, who had been sacked by Foxteq after suffering a work injury, commented: "People who have been working there for 5-10 years haven't been made permanent and I think that's very bad. We expected to work the whole day, but sometimes they told us time was up and we had to go home. One day, the supervisor told us at 11 a.m. that we needed to go home at 12. That's very disappointing."

A five-year Foxteq "veteran" painted a picture of working conditions. "At Foxteq we work like robots. They force us to lift 30-35 kilogram units for seven hours continuously and this has had bad effects on health. Workers who are doing this kind of work are in so much pain that after tea time they are already asking around for pain killers. Work that used to be done by two people is now being carried out by one person.

"The management doesn't allow people to speak out, to mingle with each other. Before, every person on the line had a chair. But the management have since removed the chairs and told us that we are process workers, and can't expect to sit down. They give us targets of 60 units per day, which is impossible to achieve. One worker can do up to 44 units, maximum. The management says that if we achieve the target of 60 units, then they will give us a chair."

The long-time Foxteq worker discussed some of the problems facing the workers, in common with their

Foxconn brothers and sisters in China and India.

"In Australia nobody is interested in Foxteq—the government, the unions, no one. There are people who have been working at Foxteq for 10-15 years and they are still casuals; they still don't get any benefits from Foxconn. Their jobs are still not guaranteed. In fact, sometimes they work only four hours and then have to go home. The union has told us to join up and they'll fight for our case, but I think the unions are for the employers, not for the workers."

Temporary jobs and increasing casualisation are part of an international trend. Figures provided by the International Labor Organization show that in all industrialised countries, temporary employment levels grew over the past decade. Japan led the way with the addition of 990,000 temporary workers, followed by the United Kingdom (603,000), the United States (520,000), Germany (434,000) and France (279,000).

As starkly demonstrated by the betrayal of the CITU in India, and the role of the AMWU in Australia, far from being vehicles through which workers can fight this process, the trade unions are direct accomplices. In order to defend even the most basic conditions, workers internationally must establish their political independence from the trade unions, and turn to the building of a new revolutionary movement, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The authors also recommend:

Australia: Sydney Foxconn workers expose sweatshop conditions
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