

Chinese Migrant Workers and Student Interns in Foxconn

Jenny Chan

wlchan_cuhk@yahoo.com

University of London

ABSTRACT

Foxconn's rise to become the world's largest electronics contract manufacturer has been hailed as one of the successes of China's capitalist transformation. Many in this cohort of rural migrant workers have become central to the formation of the new Chinese working class, yet find themselves bereft of fundamental labor and urban citizenship rights. The struggles of China's migrant workers, who comprise the bulk of the 1.3 million strong Foxconn labor force, are symbolically and materially important. My field research also highlights the emergence of a new form of student labor in China that is likely to play an important role in the global labor regime. Foxconn, in the summer of 2010, made use of the labor of 150,000 student interns. Vocational school students, 16 to 18 years of age, do "internships" for terms between three months and a year, subject to extension as production requires at short-staffed factories. Far from being freely chosen, the Chinese internship program is collectively organized, with enterprises, local governments and schools subverting the fundamental goals of internship to the detriment of students and for the profit of Foxconn, Apple and other electronic behemoths. With governments providing special funds for schools that meet Foxconn labor quotas, and with teachers earning extra income for monitoring student interns, the ties between government, schools and the corporation are strong. Pressures for progressive change from concerned educators and labor rights advocates, however, can strengthen the movements emerging among interns at Foxconn and other companies in China and in other countries.