

Dying for an iPad

AT LONG LAST I'VE GOT MY IPAD! Ever since Steve Jobs unveiled the magical device I've been dying to get one. Finally, last Friday, the day came. I was initially dismayed when my local Mac shop said they'd sold out! So, I rushed immediately to Curry's around the corner and, as luck would have it, they had a limited supply in stock. So I was spared despair. I dashed home, rapidly unpacked the wonderful screen, and then had to fathom out how to get the sim card into the bloody thing. Forty-five minutes later, I espied the pinhole in the bottom edge, rummaged through the packaging for the pinhole thingy and all was well.

All was well, that is, until in my eagerness to commence my 'iPad experience' I lighted upon an article in the *New York Times*. It was about a 19-year-old Chinese lad, Ma Xiangqian, who was found dead in front of his "high rise dormitory" in January this year. His "dormitory" was on the "campus" of Foxconn Technology in Shenzhen, China. The lad had apparently killed himself rather than go on cleaning factory toilets and making stuff for Apple, Dell, and Hewlett Packard.

It turns out that words like "dormitory" and "campus" are misnomers. The "dorms" in question are narrow rooms in which the walls are lined end-to-end with three-tier bunks. A bunk in one of these tiers is the only living space provided for the youngsters who made my iPad, my iPhone, and my MacBook. There was no privacy, no refuge from the forty or so other workers who shared Ma Xiangqian's room. These are barracks of the worst sort and the "campuses" in which the barracks and the factories are situated are designed to keep the young migrant workers isolated from the surrounding community, and from all contact with the outside world.

Ma Xiangqian worked eleven-hour shifts seven nights a week for \$1 an hour. Since then twelve other workers between 18 and 24 have killed themselves in order to escape the desperate misery of working and living in Foxconn's production camps, which in Shenzhen alone, house around 400,000 workers racked up like battery hens. Recently, wire netting has been fixed to windows and stairwells in a manner similar to those fitted in prison galleries to prevent inmates from killing themselves.

The boss, Terry Gou, employs a total of 800,000 people in China. His friend and leading customer, Apple's Steve Jobs, assures us that Terry Gou's production camps, equipped with dormitories, banks, and restaurants, are not "sweatshops". Gou has hurriedly ordered pay rises of 30% while insisting that the suicide rate among his vast army of workers is nothing out of the ordinary – certainly not above the average suicide rate for young people in China.

I am in no position to venture an opinion on this defence, or on the views of Foxconn's representatives who have suggested that workers have been killing themselves in order to ensure that their families get the large sums routinely paid out by the company in compensation.

However, the thought of working eleven-hour shifts, seven nights a week, for \$1 an hour, and being housed in a rack of bunks with forty others in temperatures of 30 degrees without air-conditioning, is my idea of a nightmare. Steve Jobs, speaking fluent billionaire, might not think that Foxconn's plants are "sweatshops" but this is exactly what most normal people would call them. When we add the harsh discipline, the military drills, the verbal abuse meted out by supervisors, and the enforced "self-criticism", it becomes clear that Mr Gou and Mr Jobs are simply running a regime of Maoist repression in the service of value expansion. This is capitalism at it's harshest promoted and protected by a dictatorship.

Just as in Stalin's Russia, modern Chinese workers have the right to elect union representatives and to

vote them out of office if they are dissatisfied with their performance. But, just like Stalin's Russia, the paper of the Chinese constitution, and the workers' rights it guarantees, are not worth the paper that they are printed on. Foxconn opened its first factories in Shenzhen in 1988, but the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) did not establish an organization at Foxconn until 2006. Currently, there is a fifteen-person union committee composed of people appointed entirely by the management.

These official unions are sanctioned by the Communist oligarchy and their role is to assist the management in ensuring that production is not disrupted by dissatisfaction within the workforce. Consequently, the officials of these phoney unions see their role as keeping an eye on things for the local and regional Communist Party Secretaries and for the managements of particular enterprises. This, the Honda workers at Foshan in Southern China recently alleged, even includes beating up strikers.

But it seems that the days of these fake unions are numbered as Chinese workers begin to take matters into their own hands. There have been a number of strikes at Honda and Hyundai factories and at other auto parts plants as Chinese workers have begun to demand direct negotiations with their employers over wages and conditions.

The apparently limitless supply of cheap labour is beginning to dry up as migrant workers are driving up turnover rates to unsustainable levels by changing jobs every few months in their relentless search for better wages and tolerable conditions. This, and the extraordinary success of the industrial revolution over the last thirty years, appears to be beginning to create conditions favourable for the development of genuine trades unionism in China. If the dictatorship learns to live with this development then these new rank and file organizations could play a crucial role in the development of civil society and of the rule of law in China, as the arbitrary actions of Party officials and

industrial bosses are progressively brought under control by the actions of ordinary citizens and workers.

Many people in the West will respond to the suicide of Chinese youngsters in the electronics plants by demanding that Steve Jobs, Michael S. Dell, Mark V. Hurd, and the other electronics billionaires, take action to ensure that their products are not made in “sweatshops” – they will call for inspections – the suppression of child labour and the abolition of low pay and dangerous conditions. This will help to assuage our bad conscience as we merrily go on enjoying the fruits of sweatshop labour. We can lean on Primark and H & M and Apple and all the rest of those companies that bring us “competitively priced” goods in order to get them to act ethically. But, unfortunately this is not the way that capitalism works. Left to their own devices capitalists will simply finesse the exploitation process with as much window dressing as seems necessary. They will not spontaneously respond either to “public opinion” or to ethical appeals.

Only the actions of workers organising themselves to interrupt the production process with strikes and other disorders will effect any real change. Only these disorders will break the habit of arbitrary action by rapacious employers. What is more it is only these disorders and the fear of these disorders that can create a climate in which liberal industrialists, politicians, artists, social commentators and other activists, can bring about the full incorporation of the working class into society – enabling the mass of the people to win defensible political and social rights.

This is the experience of the working class in the rich well-established capitalist countries and we can have no reason for believing that it will be any different in China or Vietnam or Bangladesh. Of course, one could be forgiven for doubting the effectiveness of trade unionism given the dismal conduct of our own sclerotic and bureaucratised trades unions, but this would be to forget the key democratising role, which they played during our own industrial past.