

Apple faces boycott threat over Chinese factories

According to recent reports, top selling Apple gadgets are made in conditions that are unfair, unsafe and unethical. Bosses face a painful question: how many people died to make the iPhone?



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Apple Inc. is the biggest technology company in the world. Its bestselling products, the iPhone, iPad and iPod, are icons of modern design. Sales run into the tens and hundreds of millions each year.

So, of course, do profits. Last week, Apple announced that its net revenues had hit record-breaking heights in the final quarter of 2011, doubling to more than \$13 billion. If Apple were a country, its overall income would put it in the top 60 economies in the world, about the same size as Bangladesh or Vietnam.

But now, a new controversy is threatening to sour the mood. An investigation by journalists at the *New York Times* has found that the sleek black bodies of Apple's much loved gadgets conceal a hidden cost – a cost not counted in dollars, but in health, happiness and human lives.

This cost is being paid not by Apple employees in the company's gleaming California HQ, but by young people work-



ing for less well known firms in China, on the other side of the world. It is these firms that actually put together the millions of iPods, iPads and iPhones sold each year.

For salaries of around \$17 per day, hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers toil through 12-hour shifts at high tech production lines. Legs swell from hours of standing, so much that by the end of the day some people can hardly walk. Many work six or seven days a week, or do double shifts – snatching moments of sleep in overcrowded dormitories on the factory grounds.

Complaints are not encouraged. ‘Work hard on the job today,’ warn signs on the walls, ‘or work hard finding a new job tomorrow.’

And, most dammingly for Apple’s reputation, safety standards appear to be lax. In December, an explosion in one factory injured 59 workers. Six months before, a young man had been killed in a similar incident. Two years ago, workers at

another factory were forced to use a toxic chemical to clean iPhone screens. 137 people were poisoned.

APPLE OF DISCORD

As the news spreads, a growing number of commentators are calling for a boycott of Apple products until working conditions at these factories are dramatically improved. Many even say the company must bring its manufacturing back to the US, where workers will be paid better wages, work fewer hours and be covered by health and safety law.

Apple bosses – and their defenders – insist things are not so simple. Yes, they admit, conditions in Chinese factories are hard. And in fact, Apple works hard to improve them – carrying out hundreds of inspections each year. Most importantly, although these jobs sound tough, for many Chinese people they are the only route out of poverty and into the ranks of the middle class. Most would much rather have these jobs than no job at all.

Q & A

Q Do I need to start feeling guilty about wanting an iPad?

A That question is hotly debated. It's certainly worth thinking about at least – just as it's worth thinking about the impact of anything you buy.

Q What?

A Well – companies almost always chase maximum profits. That means the best way to change the way companies behave is to threaten to stop buying their products. It gives consumers a lot of power to change the world. With great power, of course, comes great responsibility.

Q Isn't that a line from Spiderman?

A Doesn't mean it isn't true!

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

‘Products manufactured abroad should be banned.’

WHAT DO YOU THINK?