

iPhone-maker rallies workers after China suicides

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Thousands of Foxconn workers attend a rally to raise morale at the heavily regimented factories inside the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen, south China, Guangdong province, Wednesday August 18, 2010. Following a string of suicides at its Chinese factories, Foxconn Technology Group raised workers' wages and installed safety nets on buildings to catch would-be jumpers. Now the often secretive manufacturer of the iPhone and other electronics is holding rallies for its workers to raise morale at the heavily regimented factories. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

(AP) -- Young workers who normally spend their days assembling iPhones and other high-tech gadgets packed a stadium at their massive campus Wednesday, waving pompoms and shouting slogans at a rally to raise morale following a string of suicides at the company's heavily regimented factories.

The outreach to workers shows how the normally secretive Foxconn Technology Group has been shaken by the suicides and the bad press they have attracted.

"For a long period of time I think we were kind of blinded by our success," said Louis Woo, special assistant to Terry Gou, the founder of Foxconn's parent company. "We were kind of caught by surprise."

The company has already raised wages, hired counselors and installed safety nets on buildings to catch would-be jumpers. Other changes include job rotation so workers can try different tasks and grouping dorm assignments by home province so workers don't feel so isolated.

However, Woo acknowledged there will be challenges in preventing such tragedies in a work force of 920,000 spread across 16 factories in China, all of which are to have morale boosting rallies. Woo said he expected the company will grow to 1.3 million workers sometime next year.

"No matter how hard we try, such things will continue to happen," he said.

The rally Wednesday took place at Foxconn's mammoth industrial park in Shenzhen, which employs 300,000 and where most of the suicides have taken place. The latest suicide - the 12th this year - occurred Aug. 4 when a 22-year-old woman jumped from her factory dormitory in eastern Jiangsu province.

Twenty thousand workers dressed in costumes ranging from cheerleader outfits to Victorian dresses filled the stadium at the factory complex, which was decorated with colorful flags bearing messages such as "Treasure your life, love your family." The workers chanted similar slogans and speakers described their career development at Foxconn.

As they filed toward the stadium for the rally, a flood of workers headed in the other direction to begin the night shift.

"In the past, from the time we started work until when we finished, we would not really have a break. But now we've been given time to rest," said 18-year-old worker Huang Jun. "If I can get off work early enough and have a little time for fun, then I feel a bit better and less stressed out."

Other workers said they wanted Foxconn to organize more recreational activities such as sports or karaoke.

Woo said it was common for workers to have 80 hours a month of overtime, but Foxconn was aiming to reduce the workload and become the first company in the industry to keep overtime to a maximum of 36 hours a month - as required by Chinese law.

Foxconn, part of Taiwan's Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., has built itself into the world's largest contract maker of electronics by delivering quality products on thin profit margins for customers including Apple Inc., Sony Corp., Dell Inc., Nokia Corp. and Hewlett-Packard Co.

Labor activists, however, say that success has come in part from driving workers hard by enforcing a rigid management style, operating a too-fast assembly line and requiring excessive overtime. The company denies that it treats employees inhumanely.

The troubles at Foxconn came to light amid broader labor unrest in China and highlighted Chinese workers' growing dissatisfaction with the low wages and pressure-cooker working conditions that helped turn the country into an international manufacturing powerhouse.

One activist said the rally Wednesday was unlikely to boost morale and

does not replace the need for more thoroughgoing reforms.

"I don't think today's event is going to achieve anything except provide a bit of theater," said Geoffrey Crothall, spokesman for the China Labor Bulletin, a labor rights group based in Hong Kong. "Basically what Foxconn needs to do is treat its workers like decent human beings and pay them a decent wage. It's not rocket science."

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