

Labor group sees progress at major Apple supplier (Update)

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A woman walks by a banner advertising iPhone 5c at a subway station in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, Dec. 12, 2013. A Seoul court rejected Samsung's claim that iPhone and iPad models violated three of its patents, another setback for the South Korean electronics giant in a global battle with Apple over rights to technologies that power smartphones and tablets. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

A labor group monitoring three Chinese factories that make iPhones and other Apple products says once-oppressive working conditions have steadily improved in the last 18 months, but more must be done to reduce the amount of overtime that employees work.

The audit released Thursday by the Fair Labor Association represents

the final assessment in a process that started last year at plants run in China by Apple's largest supplier, Foxconn.

Reports depicting the Foxconn plants as inhumane sweatshops prompted Apple Inc. to hold its foreign contractors to higher standards. The Cupertino, Calif., company joined the Fair Labor Association last year as part of a commitment to improve the situation.

Apple is the only major tech company in a 14-year-old labor group that also includes clothing makers, shoe makers and other manufacturers promising to curb abuses in overseas factories.

The report concluded Foxconn factories in Longhua, Chengdu and Guanlan had reached virtually all the goals set out in a plan adopted last year.

"We are proud of the progress we have made together with the FLA and Foxconn," Apple said in a statement. "Our suppliers must live up to the toughest standards in the industry if they want to keep doing business with Apple."

Excessively long work schedules remain a problem, however. The FLA says more than half of the 170,000 employees at the Foxconn factories exceeded China's legal limit of 36 monthly overtime hours from March through October.

Foxconn plants in Longhua and Chengdu consistently limited workers' time on the clock below 60 hours per week during the review period, according to the FLA. That met the labor group's standards, but surpassed China's legal limit of 49 hours per week.

Apple said it has reduced excessive overtime at Foxconn and other suppliers, cutting the average workweek to 53 hours, which the company

said is well below industry norms.

"We will continue to provide transparency by reporting working-hours compliance each month on our website and we are committed to reducing overtime even further," Apple said.

The Guanlan factory exceeded the 60-hour work week during seven weeks of the FLA's review period.

Foxconn is part of Hon Hai Precision Industry Co.

Foxconn's progress is "a significant step in the right direction," said Auret van Heerden, FLA's president. He said the FLA expects Apple to continue pushing Foxconn to pare the amount of time that Foxconn employees work.

Even as conditions at the Foxconn factories plants improve, there are recurring complaints about abuses at other Chinese facilities that make Apple products.

China Labor Watch, a nonprofit group that monitors Chinese factories, said in a recent report that it uncovered a wide range of violations during an examination of factories in Shanghai and Suzhou run by Apple contractor Pegatron Corp. The problems included sexual discrimination, excessive working hours, poor living conditions and pollution.

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