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Thomas Claburn (China Labor Watch)

# China. Apple Finds Child Labor Violations At Suppliers

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***The company says that it has taken steps to address violations of its Supplier Code of Conduct.***

Apple last week reported that some of its foreign suppliers had employed underage workers at their facilities and that some had hired noncertified hazardous waste disposal companies.

"Apple discovered three facilities that had previously hired 15-year-old workers in countries where the minimum age for employment is 16," the company said in its report. "Across the three facilities, our auditors found records of 11 workers who had been hired prior to reaching the legal age, although the workers were no longer underage or no longer in active employment at the time of our audit."

Find out how to increase availability while reducing data center energy consumption Apple said that in response to finding child labor policy violations, it required a review of all employment records at facilities where the violations took place to determine how the hiring of underage workers happened. The company also said that it required affected facilities to put processes in place to prevent that from happening again.

In the three facilities where it found waste disposal practices in contravention of company policy, Apple said that it required the three factories to stop shipping waste, to hire certified vendors for hazardous waste disposal, and to work with a third-party consultant in a review of systems for hazardous waste management.

The company found other violations of its Supplier Code of Conduct as well. It audited 102 supplier facilities. At 60 of them, "we found records that indicated workers had exceeded weekly work-hour limits more than 50 percent of the time."

Apple sets a maximum of 60 hours of work per week for those making its products and requires at least one day of rest.

International relief organization Unicef says that for children between the ages of 15 and 17, labor beyond 43 hours per week should be considered harmful.

Apple also found underpayment of overtime wages at 48 facilities, payment that is less than the minimum wage at 24 facilities, disciplinary wage reductions at 45 facilities, underpayment of legally required benefits at 57 facilities, and hiring discrimination based on pregnancy and other medical conditions.

In all cases, Apple said that it has taken steps to bring its suppliers into compliance with its code of conduct.

Apple says that it is "committed to ensuring the highest standards of social responsibility wherever our products are made" and that it works "proactively with our suppliers to drive change."

Li Qiang, executive director of China Labor Watch, a New York-based labor rights NGO, said that while Apple may be a bit better than the rest of the tech industry, the difference isn't that pronounced. In fact, he says, many suppliers do work for multiple companies, each of which may have a different social responsibility program.

"The actual situation in China is much worse than the Apple report indicates," said Li through an interpreter during a phone interview. "The Apple report only covers Apple's direct suppliers. In factories which indirectly supply Apple, the situation is worse."

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"The whole industry needs to have a uniform enforceable standard," he said, noting that if Apple succeeds in enforcing good labor practices while other companies don't bother, then Apple will be at a competitive disadvantage.

"The industry needs to face it that to improve labor standards, it must pay some costs," he said.

According to Forbes, Apple's average gross profit margin over the past five years is 34.8% while Dell's is 18.9%.

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