
GLOBAL ELECTRONICS

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watchdogging "High Tech"

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P.C.P.I. CONDITIONS

It is rare that we receive a detailed account of working and living conditions for workers in Asia's export-oriented electronics industries. Many current pamphlets on the subject rely on research conducted years ago. However, a recent report, published by the **Health and Workers Bulletin** (Philippines), January-June, 1987, brings the record up to date. Unfortunately, in this case, conditions have not gotten any better.

With the cooperation of the PCPI Workers' Union, researchers surveyed the workforce of Philips Components Philippines, Inc. in late 1985 and early 1986. PCPI assembles integrated circuits and discrete semiconductors for export, and it employs slightly over 700 workers.

Two hundred permanent PCPI employees responded to the survey. Of those 84% are female; most are single; all were between the ages to 18 and 35. The report does not quantify the responses, but it gives anecdotal descriptions of serious occupational hazards in each of PCPI's various sections. For example, in one production area, known as Metal Can, workers are "victims of excessive noise from machines, eye problems cause by prolonged microscope use, excessive heat coming from the oven, and exposure to chemicals used in cleaning, tin-dipping, and marking of units. In the Workshop, workers inhale the carcinogen polyvinyl chloride.

The researchers conclude, "Many workers dreamt of working in an electronics industry. They thought to be employed there would give them good pay, a sanitary environment, and freedom from occupational hazards. These first impressions of the workers, however, are contrary to the actual working conditions. Workers in this type of industry are constantly threatened with various dangers in their workplace, such as excessive noise, chemicals with detrimental effects to health, blurring of vision due to prolonged use of TV monitors and microscopes, and high levels of radiation."

Most workers face production quotas, and most departments have three shifts. Employees are required to change their shift every month.

Equally significant, researchers found that the average workers monthly salary does not come close to meeting basic monthly expenses. The researches pegged the typical take-home pay at 1,341 pesos per month, compared to expenses of 2,135 pesos. Half the surveyed workers reported that there is compulsory overtime, but the researchers noted, "The large deficit between their monthly income and their expenditures forces many workers to work overtime."

PCPI does provide medical and dental benefits to employees, in addition to canteen subsidies, funeral contributions (for workers and family), and term life insurance. There are important limits, however. For example. Maternity benefits only cover the first four legitimate children.

MALAYSIAN WOMEN RESIST

Asian government officials whose job it is to attract foreign electronics firms extoll both the dexterity and docility of the Asian female. All too often, critics of government labor policy take such descriptions at face value.

Frequently, however, young Asian women workers have stood up for their rights, even in the absence of organization or outside support. One
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MISSING MONTHS

Every day, in every way, we get further and further behind. In case you haven't noticed, this is the August, 1987 issue of **Global Electronics**. The last one, though written in June, was officially "April."

There are many reasons, and if you wish to know them, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the Pacific Studies Center. We'll answer as soon as we have time.

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It just goes to show you, the best laid plans of mice and keyboards...

Malaysian factory worker described a spontaneous act of resistance which is probably typical of labor relations in most East Asian countries:

"Sometimes we are forced to do overtime every day. One time all of us did overtime for a month. At the end of the month the supervisor told us that he had lost our overtime slips so he couldn't pay us. We told him we could remember how many hours of overtime we had done, but he said he couldn't trust us."

This worker and two others talked to the forty Malay and Indian women on their production line. At 1:00 pm the next day, they all stopped work. He asked why, and then asked them to continue working while he talked to upper management. They refused, so he offered to let one of them speak to the management. They insisted that all be allowed to speak.

The worker continued, "We said 'No, we all want to speak.' Then he said, 'OK, tomorrow by lunch I'll pay you.' We told him if we weren't paid we would do the same thing the next day. So the next day we were all paid our overtime."

The workers won, but management attempted to isolate the three instigators of resistance. One who was pregnant was sent to work with chemicals, so she quit. Another was promoted to an office job. The third, the woman who retold the story, was warned not to speak with groups of workers.

"Organizing Malaysian Women Workers," in *Voices Rising*, May-June, 1987, a Special Report on Micro-Chip Technology: Its Impact on Women Workers, Philippines Consultation, October, 1986. Published by the Women's Program of the International Council for Adult Education, c/o Participatory Research Group 229 College Street, Suite 309, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4, Canada.

WORKER BENEFITS IN ASIA

Non-monetary benefits are usually an important part of the overall compensation packages provided the Asian assemblers employed by U.S. and other foreign electronics firms. Most critics of offshore assembly—ourselves included—have emphasized the social control function of such benefits.

Researcher Vivian Lin contends that control is only part of their function. She visited more than thirty electronics companies in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Silicon Valley in 1982 and 1983. She surveyed more than nine hundred workers, interviewed more than one hundred, and met with corporate and government officials.

Lin argues that company-provided health services, housing, transportation, and food service are often necessary for the reproduction of labor power. Without them, it might be difficult to maintain a steady workforce. As one might expect, companies provide more such services in Malaysia, where they are needed, than in Singapore, where there is more public housing, health care, and transportation.

She traces the origin on such services: "Company health and welfare services have not emerged simply out of the wisdom of management. In looking at the development of health services in Malaya, Manderson argues that social welfare programs were a feature of colonial rule introduced to ensure the social preconditions necessary for the exploitation of resources. Medical care was introduced to maintain the labour force necessary for capitalist penetration while minimizing the ill-health produced by such penetration. At the same time, it legitimated the presence of the colonial state. In some ways, the TNC's social welfare programs also serve the dual purpose of reproduction and legitimation."

Lin critiques company clinics, observing, "Interviews suggest that most health care providers associated with industry do not believe that there are significant health problems arising from the workplace." She adds, "The nurses are gatekeepers. As employees of the companies, the

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nurses' main duties are to make the workers well enough to work and to make sure they are not cheating to get out of work." That is, they make sure that labor power is available.

Other researchers have dwelt at length on beauty contests, "self-improvement" classes, picnics, and other company-sponsored recreational and social activities. After all, those activities demonstrate flagrant sexist cultural manipulation by employers.

Lin, however, says most workers don't participate. She argues, "Indeed, most interviewees had few remarks about social and recreational activities sponsored by the company, but they had many opinions about health care, housing, food, and transport—the services necessary to maintain their economic lives."

Finally, Lin says that most researchers have depicted Asian women workers as the powerless victims of the conscious strategies of corporate management, and she calls such analysis simplistic: "While subordination of women may be maintained by the organization of production and by cultural attitudes, workers do not necessarily accept and live with the rules as imposed by management or maintain the outlook in which they were brought up. Consent is produced through dynamic interaction, through a process of bargaining, individually as well as collectively, between labour and management."

("Health and Welfare and the Labour Process: Reproduction and Compliance in the Electronics Industry in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 16., No. 4, 1986.)

Lin's research is solid, but she appears to exaggerate her differences with others who have studied high-tech in Asia. Most researchers probably share her views, but they have chosen not to emphasize the value to workers that company-supplied benefits represent.

TOXICS UPDATE

1. Five more facilities in Silicon Valley have been added to the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund "final" list of sites that require the clean-up of toxic materials. The Moffett Field Naval Air Station joined the list along with numerous other military facilities across the nation. Three semiconductor factories—run by Monolithic Memories, National Semiconductor, and Teledyne Semiconductor—plus Applied Materials' semiconductor equipment plant were moved from the "proposed" SuperFund list to the final list.

Seven other Silicon Valley sites—six at high-tech plants—had already been added to the final list in May, 1986, while eight remain proposed. (*San Jose Mercury News*, July 21, 1987.)

2. The former Fairchild Semiconductor plant in San Jose, site of the toxic leak that lifted the lid on high-tech's dismal record of storing and using hazardous materials, may be redeveloped. The Koll Co. a major Silicon Valley developer, is proposing the construction of a neighborhood shopping center on 16.5 of Fairchild's 22 acres. (*San Jose Business Journal*, July 20, 1987)

Fairchild has reportedly spent \$30 million cleaning the water and soil beneath the site, but clean-up still continues. In addition, last year Fairchild paid residents of its neighborhood an undisclosed, but substantial settlement in response to a suit charging the company with responsibility for birth defects and other health problems in the area due to the contamination of the public water supply.

3. Ernest Lorentz Jr., the owner of Lorentz Barrel and Drum in San Jose, has been jailed for continuing to violate laws governing the handling of hazardous wastes. His firm, which recycles barrels and drums that contain hazardous wastes from electronics production, is one of the Silicon Valley sites proposed for inclusion on the Superfund list. California officials consider it one of the worst sites in the state.

Municipal Court Judge Stephen Manley sentenced Lorentz to two years in jail and more than \$2 million in fines and penalties. Lorentz is prohibited from working in the toxic waste business again, and he is required to finance health tests for current and former employees, as well as neighbors of his facility.

Lorentz is 70 years old and a diabetic. Both his feet have been amputated, and he recently suffered a mild stroke. Authorities consider his crime such a threat to public health, though, that his only special treatment has been to imprison him in the infirmary of the county jail. (*San Jose Mercury News*, July 16, 17, and 23, 1987.)

YUCATAN MAQUILADORAS

For more than two decades, U.S. electronics companies have taken advantage of low Mexican wage rates by setting up assembly plants, or maquiladoras, just south of the border. In many cases, they have established twin plants, inte-

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grating Mexican facilities with U.S. factories in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

Now the Mexican government is promoting electronics assembly in the state of Yucatan, distant via land but only two hours by air from Miami and convenient for companies based along the East Coast of the U.S. **Electronics Business** (January 15, 1987) reports that Florida-based Transformers Inc. already winds radar transformers in the Yucatan capital of Merida. Wages in the Yucatan are about a third lower than Mexican wages in border communities.

SUPERCONDUCTORS

The development of near-room temperature superconductors, materials that present no electrical resistance, is a major scientific breakthrough. The business press and popular scientific press are probably correct to recognize the enormous commercial potential.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that President Reagan has joined the excitement by proposing a 3-year, \$150 million Pentagon program called the Superconductivity Initiative. The Initiative has at least two goals: to accelerate the military application of superconductor

technology; and to "stay ahead of the Japanese." (**Aviation Week and Space Technology**, August 3, 1987, and **Electronics**, August 6, 1987)

EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

The Americal Electronics Association regularly tabulates reports on employee turnover in the electronics industry, but the data is seldom seen in public. Recently the **San Jose Mercury News** (July 28, 1987) published a chart relating the AEA's national turnover data, for all electronics industry employees. The data shows a steady decline in turnover since 1980.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Percent Turnover</u>
1980	26
1981	24
1982	23
1983	21
1984	21
1985	17
1986	16

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