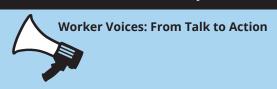# Worker Voices: From Talk to Action

Silent and pliable workers are an integral part of an organisation of production built on a model of cyclical orders where workers absorb the cost. Whether employers use coercion to enforce productivity requirements and low wages or flexible employment schemes to create the ability to recruit or downsize according to the needs of production, workers stay silent under threat of disciplinary action or job loss.

Electronics Watch welcomes growing industry attention to the need for workers to have a voice. However, ending the systematic silencing of workers requires more than brief auditor visits or new mobile applications that promise to transmit workers' concerns, unilaterally, to companies. When workers have a voice they can engage in meaningful dialogue with employers and buyers to call attention to problems, contribute to solutions, and help improve working conditions. Creating opportunities for this dialogue may require a fundamental reconceptualization of the organisation of production: imagining and realising ways to achieve flexible output based on meaningful work and without coercing workers or employing flexible modes of employment that rob workers of their security.

The tenet that workers themselves are the best monitors of their working conditions is fundamental to Electronics Watch. Workers know the reality of their daily conditions and can, for example, describe effects of chemicals they handle and the impact of production targets they must meet, and recount exactly how much they have paid to recruiters to get a job in a foreign country.

However, people who suffer abuse in relations of unequal power are far more likely to stay silent than speak about their experiences. The same holds true for workers in abusive situations, especially in the absence of legally protected unions. Whether the injustice is relatively less

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serious—late payments or improper contracts—or more urgent—forced labour or toxic work environments—far more workers feel compelled to stay silent than speak about the injustices they experience.

In October 2018, Electronics Watch surveyed 30 monitoring partners and labour rights experts located in 10 electronics manufacturing countries to map priority issues for workers in different locations. When asked about the main obstacle to a meaningful and effective voice, all respondents—100%—said workers were afraid of getting fired and 94% said that they knew of incidents of management threatening workers who tried to make their voice heard. One third of respondents also knew of cases where workers had been beaten or faced other forms of physical violence when seeking to address problems in their workplace. Such incidents send a chilling message that reach across years and communities. "They would rather leave their job than voice dissatisfaction," one respondent said.

Thus, when workers do overcome obstacles to speak out about problems they face they do so deliberately and usually thoughtfully, after weighing risks and benefits. Just as victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse should be believed when they overcome obstacles to speak out, so too should workers who report harassment, abuse, and other injustices in the workplace.

How to listen to workers

When considering where workers most often report problems, not one of the 30 respondents checked the "social auditor" option. In the electronics industry the norm for social auditors is 10-minute interviews with workers selected by the auditor and conducted on the shop floor, though it could also include informal interaction with workers in other factory areas, such as dormitories and canteens. Workers are not an integral part of this process even though it is supposed to protect their rights and improve their conditions. In the Corporate Social Responsibility field, mobile applications are an increasingly popular tool to correct for this weakness in social auditing, allowing companies to engage with workers and expand their access to "worker voice." New "worker voice providers" tout their ability to "unlock worker voice," "enable direct feedback" from workers, and "engage with workers at scale." Yet, 87% of survey respondents said that the best way to listen to workers is one-on-one offsite interviews while 81% also thought offsite discussion groups with workers are a good option. That means face-to-face interaction, not mediated by a mobile application that allows only unilateral communication from workers to an auditor or company or programmed messages to workers.

Not anyone can go "offsite" and find workers to interview. Good listening is often predicated on a network of social relations built deliberately, over time. Electronics Watch monitoring partners, located near workers' communities, often develop programs and activities to support workers' welfare and advocate for their rights and work hard to develop trust and reciprocity with workers.

Good listening also requires talking to workers on their terms: when they have time; where they feel safe; and because they think it is to their benefit. The more vulnerable the workers the more difficult it is to establish this trust and the more challenging it is to learn from them and to detect problems in their workplaces.

To be sure, Electronics Watch also values on-site monitoring activities that often reach a larger number of workers in a specific work site, thereby obtaining information on the extent of a problem in that site or detecting issues that may impact relatively few workers. On-site activities with both workers and managers can also be critical to corroborate evidence, understand issues from different perspectives, and remediate labour rights violations. Electronics Watch also uses technology to access large quantities of data on grievances that workers post online in order to better understand the scope of risks that workers face and identify priority issues. But understanding a workplace from workers' perspectives, detecting the fundamental labour rights breaches, and developing long-term solutions will always require face-to-face interaction with workers based on relations of trust and reciprocity.

Discovering hidden issues

If workers had a meaningful, effective voice companies would see their audit findings expand to areas where non-compliances (findings of labour rights and other code violations) appear to them to be relatively rare today. More workers would report problems, resulting in more data points, better understanding of the interrelations between breaches of labour standards, and qualitatively better research.

The majority of non-compliances that companies find today are in the areas of wages and benefits, working hours, and occupational health and safety. These findings appear to be based mostly on physical observations in factories and documentary evidence even though worker interviews are a standard part of most audit methodologies. Listening to workers and workers' representatives based on relations of trust and reciprocity could yield evidence of violations in additional areas or could suggest that a problem is more serious than previously thought. For example, rarely do companies report non-compliances of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining even though most electronics manufacturing takes place in countries where these fundamental rights do not exist in law or practice. Based on Electronics Watch experience, companies would hear from workers about health problems that may not be covered under codes of conduct but nevertheless are important to workers. They would detect the heavy recruitment costs migrant workers sometimes incur and not just those that their suppliers report. They would see payment irregularities on workers' pay slips that may not show up on pay slips submitted for audits.

From listening to dialogue

A commitment to listening to workers is a start but not the end. Workers with a meaningful and effective voice are also workers who have the time, space and resources, as well as the security, to defend their rights and drive change in dialogue with employers and buyers.

According to the respondents to our survey, the top priority for workers across regions is, not surprisingly, higher wages. The issue of a living wage is barely on companies' to-do lists but would be when workers have a meaningful, effective voice; it could then be addressed in dialogue, for example through collective bargaining.

Occupational hygienists and advocates have called attention to the health hazards of many chemicals in the electronics production process for decades. Yet, workers still suffer unnecessarily when better engineering controls and safer chemical alternatives could be made available. This is a key concern for workers across regions, according to our survey respondents. While some companies have made a commitment to eliminate worker exposures to toxic chemicals, such initiatives need to be expanded and infused with the urgency of workers' realities, and then shaped in dialogue with workers.

Worker voices and the organisation of production

To go beyond listening to workers, to create an environment where workers can engage in meaningful and effective dialogue with employers and buyers to address issues like wages and health and safety requires a re-imagination of fundamental aspects of the organisation of production in an industry dependent on cyclical, flexible outputs.

Research by Electronics Watch and our monitoring partners as well as a large body of academic research consistently demonstrate that the silencing of workers is an industry-wide structural problem. In-built limitations preventing workers from voicing complaints, let alone engaging in substantial social dialogue or collective bargaining go beyond legal restrictions on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining and the lack of enforcement capacity of state labour inspectors. These limitations also include forms of worker coercion, such as punitive discipline, and even forced labour to achieve production requirements. Pervasive flexible employment schemes, such as short-term contracts or employment through a temporary agency to create capacity to recruit or downsize, depending on the needs of production, deprive workers of security to which they would be entitled as permanent workers and contribute to an organisation of production that effectively silences workers.

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Thus, supporting workers to have an effective, meaningful voice resists easy solutions through social audits or mobile applications. As a first step, listening to workers requires engaging with workers on their terms, usually through well-developed networks of social relations. That process helps to call attention to problems social audits often miss. But to take the step beyond listening to dialogue ultimately requires a fundamental reconceptualization of the organisation of production: how to achieve flexible output without coercing workers, without forced labour, and without flexible employment at the cost of security. The challenge to the electronics industry is to imagine ways to organise flexible production while providing security, decent working conditions, challenging and interesting work environments, autonomy and higher wages. Such challenges have been met in other places and other industries. Workers can help industry meet this challenge in the electronics industry as well.

Electronics Watch Policy Briefs

The Electronics Watch Policy Briefs offer insights and ideas on issues related to socially responsible and sustainable public procurement based on Electronics Watch's perspective as a labour rights monitoring organisation that places workers at the centre of its activities. The Policy Briefs aim to bring worker perspectives to the forefront of public debates and to contribute to more sustainable and just global supply chains in electronics and other areas.

The mission of Electronics Watch is to help public sector organisations work together, and collaborate with civil society monitors in production regions, to protect the rights of workers in their electronics supply chains.

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