

Can tragedy spur improvement in working conditions?



Image: Huashang Press, courtesy of Xu Xiao's family

Products:	Professional display products, IP cameras, bluetooth speakers and computer boxes
Factory:	Qisda Optronic (Suzhou) Co. Ltd
Location:	Suzhou, China
Date of monitoring:	2020 and September 2023 to March 2024

In August 2023, a worker was found dead in his dormitory at the Qisda Optronic factory in Suzhou, China. Although he worked excessive overtime and consecutive night shifts shortly before his death, the Government Social Security Department determined that his death was not a work injury because he did not die during working hours or within the workplace itself.

The Qisda factory has been on Electronics Watch's radar for some time, as it is a significant supplier to many affiliates. The death of Xu Xiao, a 23-year-old migrant worker, has now spurred the involvement of many parties to address systemic worker rights issues.

Monitoring and findings

Excessive overtime is endemic in the electronics industry in China. Xu Xiao's attendance records show that he was working well above the maximum overtime permitted by Chinese law (36 hours per month), and the maximum total working hours in industry codes (60 hours per week).

During his 33 days of employment at Qisda, Xu worked 12-hour shifts, including 10.5 hours of working time, six days a week. During one period, he worked 13 consecutive 12-hour night shifts.

Xu's family reported that when he began work at Qisda in July 2023, he was in good health with no underlying medical conditions. But on 14 August, he was found dead in his dormitory. The police ruled out homicide and substance abuse.

At the time of Xu's death, the base salary, without overtime and allowances, was about CNY2,280 (€290) per month. Low wages force many workers to seek overtime to increase their earnings.

Remediation process

In September 2023, Qisda signed a humanitarian compensation agreement with the family for CNY260,000 (€33,000). Following the intervention of our monitoring partner, additional compensation for the family has been agreed.

Additionally, Qisda has implemented a new policy to prevent overwork: when a worker's weekly duty reaches six days, they will no longer have access to the factory for a seventh consecutive day of work.

With guidance from Electronics Watch, its monitoring partner and affiliates, the dialogue with Qisda has since moved on to systemic issues such as the over-reliance on labour agency workers and workers' lack of voice in and influence over their working conditions. Effective worker-management dialogue is a long-term goal of these discussions.

According to Qisda, 380 out of its 4,000 workers are worker representatives. Overtime was on the agenda at the last annual meeting. However, neither the risk of excessive working hours nor non-voluntary overtime were effectively addressed. Collective negotiation with employees on issues such as remuneration, working hours, rest and vacation time is required by law in the province where Qisda is located.

Key takeaways

Whether or not Xu's death is work-related, studies in industrial hygiene have long shown that long working hours can adversely affect workers' health. The ILO adopted its first convention to limit regular weekly working hours to 48 over 100 years ago. The ILO states that: "excessive hours of work and inadequate periods of rest and recuperation ... can damage workers' health and increase the risk of work accidents."

Electronics Watch and its monitoring partner are pursuing meaningful dialogue between workers and management as a critical next step in this case.

Such a dialogue could address:



Links between long hours, night shift work, and worker health. This dialogue could drive enforcement of overtime limits.



Workers' need for a living wage and regular working hours, so they can choose to reject overtime.



Causes of the excessive use of short-term employment and outside recruitment services, to create a sustainable approach for hiring permanent workers.



How a union could function at Qisda, without interference from either government or management. Such a union would help ensure worker priorities were top of the agenda for this dialogue.

Some of these issues can be resolved at the local level between workers and management, following provincial laws on collective negotiations. Other issues require the involvement of supply chain actors based on the principle of shared responsibility.

Although systemic changes will not happen overnight, meaningful dialogue would constitute real progress in protecting workers' well-being at Qisda. It would also represent a lasting legacy of Xu's tragic death.