

Worker testimony leads to remediation for sexual harassment at Tripod



Factory: Tripod (Wuxi) Electronic Co., Ltd.

Location: Wuxi, Jiangsu, China

Exterior view of Tripod Wuxi factory, from online company recruitment notice

Over the last 10 years, Electronics Watch monitoring has uncovered several instances of exploitation affecting student interns and other young workers at many sites in China. Young people, together with migrant workers, women, ethnic minorities and contract workers, are particularly vulnerable to labour abuses. In 2024, Electronics Watch monitoring of the Tripod factory in Wuxi identified several human rights issues, including the sexual harassment of a student worker, excessive working hours, wage deductions and unfair recruitment. Although the factory has not addressed working hours, its management immediately accepted monitoring findings and reported meaningful steps towards remediation.

Monitoring and findings

Between April and June 2024, an Electronics Watch monitoring partner reviewed recruitment ads and social media posts, conducted remote interviews with workers at Tripod and analysed related documentation. Together, these captured the experiences and observations of 21 individuals.

Among the public sources was an online post from March 2024 alleging sexual harassment of a female student worker by a male colleague. This allegation was corroborated in a remote interview in July 2024, when a worker provided a second-hand account of harassment at Tripod. According to the interviewee, the factory management transferred the perpetrator after the victim's parents expressed concerns.

Other online posts suggested a power imbalance between male workers and students required to complete the work assignment to obtain their diplomas. This type of power imbalance often prevents victims from speaking up.

There was also evidence of recruitment abuses, including an overdependence on student labour. Online sources suggested that students made up over 50% of the workforce in certain departments. Chinese law limits the proportion of students to 20% of workers with the same type of position.

Additional issues included labour agencies deducting a 6% fee from workers' wages, which violated Chinese law. Recruitment notices demonstrated gender and age-based discrimination, and workers described exposure to toxic chemicals. Their testimonies and payslips documented excessive working hours well above the limits set by Chinese law. Excessive working hours and student labour can be part of the same strategy to meet highly fluctuating production demand without permanently increasing the workforce.

Remediation

In August 2024, Electronics Watch submitted the case to the Responsible Business Alliance (RBA) for remediation. Tripod immediately accepted the evidence of sexual harassment and reported an action plan. Factory management investigated its internal recruitment and labour management practices and agreed that changes were needed. The company also acknowledged the excessive use of student labour. Tripod shared a detailed summary of an audit on the student labour issue with Electronics Watch. Despite concerns about the late-April timing of that investigation, a period when factories do not typically employ students, the results appeared credible.

The summary included the precise number of student workers in the last year and disclosed information that companies would normally be reticent to share, namely that the proportion of students in one department was higher than permitted by law.

It documented that the individual who sexually harassed student workers was transferred and that regular, ongoing anti-harassment and anti-bullying training has been rolled out.

The audit did not point to meaningful engagement with workers by Tripod or the auditors, however, it documented that appropriate reporting channels are in place. The only issue that does not appear to have been adequately addressed through the audit was excessive overtime.

Key takeaways

Companies can accelerate remediation by accepting the burden of proof

It is uncommon for companies to accept human rights issues identified outside the standard audit process. They usually insist on a third-party audit to confirm the findings before acting, which can extend the process by months. By accepting the Electronics Watch findings from the outset, Tripod was able to focus on addressing harm and strengthening its preventative measures.

Cooperation and transparency lend trust to the process

Tripod's management did not try to defend its behaviour when faced with credible evidence of abuse. And, unlike many of its peers, the company promptly gave the RBA permission to share a detailed summary of audit findings with Electronics Watch. Its constructive response and willingness to share documentation of the measures taken allowed most of the issues to be resolved.

Worker testimony deserves greater priority in assessment processes

Human rights harms often go undetected in audits, which prioritise management systems over worker testimonies. Vulnerable workers fear retaliation, so do not speak up. Reviewing worker complaints on social media and conducting remote interviews allowed Electronics Watch to identify and pursue remediation for sexual harassment and other issues.

Excessive working hours remain a systemic issue

Tackling this issue case-by-case is rarely successful, as overtime remains a key strategy to deal with fluctuating production demand. Instead, it must be addressed collectively, within a framework of shared responsibility for buyers and suppliers.

Additional reflections

At the time of writing, evidence about another serious human rights issue at this site emerged. Electronics Watch will pursue dialogue with Tripod on that issue with the aim of obtaining remedy for those harmed.

At production sites throughout the electronics supply chain, it is common that a range of human rights risks and actual harms occur over time and repeatedly. These harms to workers may be the result of business operations, state actions or both.