

Report says GE supplier in China abuses workers

Dave Collins

A new report says a Chinese factory that makes light bulbs for General Electric subjects many of its employees to 64-hour work weeks and exposure to toxic mercury used in the production process.

The report by the Cleveland-based Policy Matters Ohio accuses Xiamen Topstar Lighting, a joint venture by GE and Topstar in China, of violating Chinese labor laws and GE's corporate policies.

GE officials said they were surprised by the allegations, because they "contradict our rigorous supplier criteria and findings of our reviews at this site," said Kim Freeman, a spokeswoman for GE Consumer & Industrial in Louisville, Kentucky, a subsidiary of GE. The company said it could not comment on the validity of the report but that it would investigate the claims.

A GE safety and labor audit of the factory six months ago met GE's standards, Freeman said.

Xiamen Topstar, which is based in Xiamen, a city in Fujian Province, employs about 6,000 people and makes compact fluorescent light bulbs, which have been touted for energy efficiency.

The director of administration at Xiamen Topstar Lighting dismissed the allegations, saying that the factory strictly followed labor laws on matters like working hours and overtime compensation. The small number of workers who are exposed to mercury wear protective clothing and masks, he said.

"The report by Policy Matters Ohio is intended to be malicious and hurtful," said the director, surnamed Zhu, who declined to give his full name as is common among Chinese. He angrily refused to answer further questions.

Policy Matters Ohio said workers it interviewed last year had been exhausted by the long hours and many had no idea they were working with mercury, which could damage the brain, heart, kidneys and other organs.

Workers did not get overtime and were denied pay stubs, so they did not know if their pay was accurate, the group said. Workers were required to forfeit a month's pay if they quit without permission.

The report called on GE to adhere to its own policies by making sure the process for making the light bulbs did not harm the health of the workers or violate their rights.

"GE should use its Ecoimagination - the slogan for its strategy to produce 'more energy-efficient, less emissive products' - to produce energy-efficient light bulbs in a way that does not abuse the workers who make them," Zach Schiller, a research director at Policy Matters, said in a statement. "The company should maintain a U.S. work force to make some of these products."

GE announced last year that it would increase production of energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs and phase out its incandescent bulb. The spiral-topped bulb uses 70 to 75 percent less energy than the traditional incandescent bulb, and lasts eight to 10 times as long.

As part of the change, the company announced that it would close lighting plants in Brazil, Mexico and the United States, including six plants in Ohio, as demand for the older bulbs dropped.

In addition to its manufacturing presence, China is an important market for GE, which is focused heavily on increasing its presence in growing markets, including India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

GE earned \$30 billion in emerging markets last year and hopes to increase its sales in China to \$10 billion by 2010.

The industrial, financial and entertainment conglomerate is also investing \$500 million in more than 300 projects in China to prepare for the Beijing Olympics.

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