

Press release

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Tool production in low-wage countries: Working under life-threatening conditions

FWI: Buyers should act responsibly

REMSCHEID.- "We are showing how appalling the conditions there are, something that you won't find at German plants," says Rainer Langelüddecke, Director of the Association of German Tool Manufacturers (FWI). Langelüddecke's statement came in response to shocking pictures of production facilities in low-wage countries, as documented by examples from the People's Republic of China. Numerous photos obtained by the FWI also show the lack of healthcare and life-threatening conditions that the employees face in dilapidated factories.

"Because working on presses under such conditions poses a very high risk of injury, we would immediately prohibit it in Germany," a specialist from an employers' liability insurance association in Düsseldorf said about some of the recent FWI pictures. Appalling working conditions and in some cases life-threatening production processes are typical of the insufficient occupational and industrial safety in societies where employees are exploited.

Responsible purchasing of tools

The problems faced by workers in low-wage countries include a lack of accident or disability insurance and the fact that they rarely receive care from a company doctor. "You have to open your eyes to the conditions in China and how they affect the people's quality of life," explains Langelüddecke. Private consumers and commercial buyers alike should be aware of this fact when buying inexpensive tools and so-called "bargains". "In Germany and other European countries, ethically produced brand-name products reflect not only what is manufactured but also how the work is done," says Langelüddecke.

“Unfortunately, very few companies in low-wage countries take such factors into account.”

For decades the European tool industry, and in particular the German manufacturers, have been proving their commitment to maintaining high standards with regard to healthcare and safety. “The employees’ dedication is the basis of our success. It’s something we believe in and support,” explains Volker Einbeck, Managing Director at GEDORE, one of the most important German tool manufacturers, based in Remscheid. This attitude is shared by Mark Liebholdt, Manager and Marketing Director of Witte Werkzeuge GmbH in Hagen: “Our employee focus ensures that we get top scores in terms of industrial safety — in fact, the company hasn’t had a reportable work-related accident for more than three years.” And how do low-wage countries compare?

About 5,500 fatalities per day due to inadequate industrial safety

Worldwide, around 5,500 people die daily at their workplaces or as a result of work-related illnesses. In addition, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates there are one million work-related accidents per day of work. Loss of eyesight, crushed or dismembered limbs, broken bones, skull fractures and death as a result of electrocution are just some of the consequences of workplace accidents in low-wage countries.

“None of the electrical equipment seems to be designed for high moisture or water spray levels in the wet grinding areas. The overwhelming majority of grinder operators do not wear gear such as goggles and gloves to protect themselves against the usual risks of grinding work, and they also lack appropriate work clothing, including aprons. In general it seems the people do not wear work clothing,” said one expert from the metal and surface treatment committee of an employers’ liability insurance association after the FWI had also shown him photos of Chinese tool production facilities.

Enforcing international standards

Although some of China’s “work regulations” are subject to high standards, they are no more than ineffective paper tigers because facilities are not inspected or penalized. An industrial safety law passed in 2003 gives employees the right to strike or leave their workplace if their safety is endangered, but doing so would cause workers to lose their means of livelihood.

“International organisations must enforce standards worldwide,” explains Langelüddecke. “Our experience as German tool manufacturers demonstrates that quality products can only be made under appropriate and proper conditions. Production facilities with degrading working conditions make inexpensive products possible, but they also deliver the lowest quality.”

The activities and services of the Association of German Tool Manufacturers (FWI) are described on its website at www.werkzeug.org. Private consumers and commercial buyers will find valuable information on dangerous tools at www.werkzeugwarnung.info. The latest news from the FWI and its members can be found at www.werkzeugnachrichten.de. Around 140 tool manufacturers with production facilities in Germany are members of the FWI. All the leading German manufacturers of hand tools, power tools and construction fixing solutions are members of the FWI. Among the association’s most important objectives are maintaining the broad spectrum of German tool manufacturers, safeguarding fair competition and strengthening Germany as a production location. An example of this is the association seal “Deutsches Werkzeug – made in Germany”, which the FWI uses to publicise the achievements of all German manufacturers that adhere to the stringent criteria for this designation. Tools made in Germany offer more than just top quality, as the FWI demonstrated in 2008 with its “Pluspunkt made in Germany” campaign. The FWI serves as the “voice of the tool industry” on German and international committees and vis-à-vis the public.

The study of working conditions in a global comparison was carried out on behalf of the FWI by Jörg Stimpfig, lecturer for Popular and Trade Journalism at the University of Stuttgart. Stimpfig conducted the research, drew up the reports and documented the results.

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