Trade union members face a challenge when we want to buy a phone or a laptop: the long and obscure supply chains mean we cannot be sure that the materials and components are produced to ethical standards. PSEU member Cathal Kelly reports on the efforts of a Dutch social enterprise to bring an ethical smartphone to the market.

On Christmas Eve 2013, Fairphone delivered its first phones to customers. The original plan in 2010 had been different: to start an awareness-raising campaign on the use of two conflict minerals – coltan and tin – in consumer electronics and their role in funding warlords in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But researching the supply chain led Fairphone's founder and CEO, Bas van Abel, to conclude the only way to uncover the story behind the production chains was for Fairphone itself to make a phone.

"Our goal was to understand the system and see if things could be done differently if you produced a phone putting social values at the base of your mission", says van Abel.

With its shift from a campaiging organisation to a manufacturer, Fairphone added other social concerns to its ambition. The company's social aims now include the rights of workers in the Chinese factory where Fairphones are made, along with the environmental impact of the device, including safe recycling, and the longevity of the product, in particular making it repairable.

Making a device that is designed to last goes against the grain of the mainstream of the consumer electronics industry, where many companies plan for their products to go out of date after a few years. A longer-lasting phone was important for Ciarán Swan, a SIPTU member in the Houses of the Oireachtas, who paid out over €500 in the summer 2015 for a Fairphone 2 that was not due to be delivered until December.

“I bought it because it’s a phone which has an easily upgradeable battery and many components that can be replaced easily. That increases the longevity of the device”, says Swan. “The up-front cost of the Fairphone is considerable and it’s only the fact that I’d hope to get at least five years out of it that made it even near feasible.”

Swan’s phone will be the Fairphone 2, a different model from the Fairphone 1, of which 60,000 were sold between December 2013 and February 2015, when Fairphone stopped production of its first phone. Fairphone’s share of the European smartphone market was tiny – less than 0.05 percent of that market in 2014, and no sales outside Europe – but van Abel is satisfied with Fairphone’s progress.

“I consider the fact that we actually managed to set up a company, make and market a phone and implement several innovative projects throughout the supply chain a major success”, he says.

Having been able to trace the tin and some of the coltan used in the Fairphone 1, the company shifted its attention to gold for the printed circuit board in its new model. All gold used in electronics in China is traded through the Shanghai Gold Exchange, and this means Fairphone cannot say where the specific gold in their product comes from. But they are persistent and they are looking at how to secure a license to import gold from Hong Kong. Fairphone 3 might add that third mineral to the set.

Although van Abel doesn’t dwell on it, Fairphone faced serious challenges in getting its first phone into the hands of customers. For example, the company’s big announcement of the delivery of its first 1,000 phones on Christmas Eve 2013 nearly backfired when it became clear to other customers who had also paid long in advance that delivery dates for their phones were scheduled for the following weeks rather than days.

But Fairphone responded to this and other criticisms in a manner entirely in keeping with its social ethos: transparency. An apology, an explanation that it had misjudged the volume of work in the logistics of shipping the number of phones that had been ordered, and daily updates on the numbers shipped all combined to win back much the good will that was lost. Equally candid explanations for the choices the company made about choosing a Chinese production plant and about the choice of Google's Android system were clearly honest engagement with their customers and not attempts at damage-limitation.

Two years later, in late 2015, as Fairphone was gearing up to relase its second model, it again experienced delays with production and previously announced delivery dates. "In order to meet the original production demand in a shorter period of time because of this delay, a large amount of short-term contract workers would have been needed to meet our order. However, we felt this was not consistent with our goals", Monique Lempers, Fairphone's Value Chain Director, told customers in early December. "The production and assembly of the Fairphone 2 is not done in isolation – it's closely linked to working conditions for the factory employees."

Lempers says that Fairphone's ultimate goal is to encourage a stable environment for the workforce at the Chinese plant that manufactures its product. "We want our production needs to support – and not hamper – that. So wherever possible, we encourage a hiring policy that enables a more stable workforce, higher job security and stronger employee engagement."

It is unusual – possibly unique – to see a company ask its cusomers to accept a delay getting its product because the company wants the workers at a subcontractor to be treated properly. That combination of concern for assembly-line workers in Asia and honesty with consumers in Europe brings the kind of values to consumption choices that trade union members here don't often get a

chance to support, and which many will watch with interest.

Cathal Kelly is a member of the PSEU, and had previously been in the NUJ and the GMPU. contributed to the crowd-sourcing for the Fairphone 1 in 2013.