

Thailand: 295 workers strike Nasawat Apparel factory

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The following statement was sent to the World Socialist Web Site by the Action Network for Migrants and Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association.

The Nasawat Apparel factory in Mae Sot in the Tak province has a reputation for slave-like working conditions.

During December 2001, after the workforce had not been paid for three months, workers tried to organise a strike. The employer called the police and five of the workers leaders were beaten and deported back to Burma.

The workers report that the employer has never paid the minimum wage or paid on time, often being paid only once every two months. Every time the workers complained, the employer would threaten them and call in the police.

On November 16 this year, 15 women workers attempted to escape from the factory. The manager sent his "security men" to catch them and bring them back. The manager then arranged for the police to come to the factory at night and they threatened and harassed the women into submission.

The Labour Protection Office (LPO) in Mae Sot was informed of the critical situation and on November 21 a representative went to the factory to facilitate negotiations. The manager of the factory produced fraudulent pay slips for the workers. Not only did he illegally keep their work permits, making it all but impossible to leave the factory for fear of arrest and deportation by Immigration officers whom patrol the streets constantly, but he also forced them to sign pay slips for the minimum wage of 133 Bhat (\$3.40) per day when in fact they were earning only 50 Bhat (\$1.30).

As there was no neutral interpreter, it was impossible to make any agreements, so the LPO promised to return on November 25. On the 25th the LPO officer had to be

reminded of his appointment. He said he was not free and postponed the meeting until the next day. On the 26th workers tried to persuade the LPO to hold the meeting outside the factory for their own safety, but the negotiations were held inside the factory. Six uniformed police arrived prior to negotiations and stationed themselves in front of the factory gates.

An agreement was reached and signed by Mr Kwanchai Wimut, the manager, and six of the workers representatives and witnessed by LPO officers Mr Kwuang Sajjem and Mr Srisupan Wong. In the clauses of the agreement the employer agreed to abide by the labour standards as required by the labour laws of Thailand, including payment of the minimum wage of 133 Bhat per day and 25 Bhat per hour of overtime, to pay overtime owed on the 10th of each month, and to return the workers' permits.

The employer also contracted to stop all physical abuse, coercion, or threatening of workers. Agreement was also reached on back pay owed to workers. With regard to living and working conditions, the employer agreed to increase the number of toilets and showers and ensure the health and safety of workers. Safety measures also included not dismissing workers if they made a complaint about any conditions. Also included was for the provision of three meals per day, with a 10 Bhat contribution for each meal by the employer. The employees would pay 20 Bhat per day for rent, electricity and water, and 10 Bhat per day towards the cost of the work permit.

On the first payday following the signing of this agreement, December 10, the employer broke the agreement and didn't pay any wages to the workers.

On the afternoon of December 11, one of the workers noticed that the employer was holding a meeting with representatives of the LPO, a local lawyer, and other factory owners from the Tak federation of Industries.

At 4.00 p.m., the employer called the 25 workers leaders to his office to pay them according to the agreement, but explained that he would only follow the agreement for those leaders present and not the rest of the workforce. He wanted them to accept a payment of 3,990 Bhat each, and to sign a receipt, knowing that the other workers would not get their entitlements according to the labour laws and the agreement. The 25 refused to sign.

At 5.00 p.m., the rest of the workforce stopped work for dinner and asked to talk with the 25 leaders. The employer at first refused to allow the leaders to come out of his office, but when the workers congregated together he allowed the workers' leaders to have a discussion with all the workforce.

At 5.30 p.m., Thai immigration and the local police arrived, including members of the border police. They entered the factory and held discussions with the owner. They were drinking and walking around intimidating the workers until 9.00 p.m.

Since the manager was refusing to abide by the agreement of the 26th, the leaders and workers decided to walk out. There was not enough time to collect their belongings. The police escorted them off the premises and gave them a choice of going to the police station or to a temple in the town. The workers were afraid to go with the police and decided to go to the temple by themselves. Linking arms in lines of five they walked out of the factory and to the temple of Wat Chumpol Kiri. The temple agreed to provide temporary shelter and safety for 269 workers (209 women and 60 men). Workers from other factories have donated food and money to support their fellow workers.



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