

Cambodian garment strikers victimised as unions enter talks

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1 October 2010

Thousands of Cambodian garment workers faced continuing victimisation by employers as talks commenced between union, employer and government representatives last Monday.

Union leaders used the negotiations, called for by the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen, as the basis for calling off industrial action on September 16. The strikes had gone on for four days and attracted support from an estimated 210,000 of the industry's 345,000-strong workforce. The workers were demanding a minimum monthly wage of \$US93, instead of the \$61 imposed by an agreement between some union leaders and the government in July.

As soon as the strikers returned to work on September 17, employers began to suspend factory delegates and initiate legal cases against them. Up to 300 were singled out.

Sections of workers began strike action in defence of the suspended representatives almost immediately. Employers' spokesman, Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia (GMAC) general secretary Ken Loo, said about 10,000 workers from four factories in the capital Phnom Penh and Kandal province were involved in the new strikes.

The government sent in military police to attack protesting strikers. On September 18, at least 12 workers were reportedly injured in clashes with the police. In one incident, 2,000 workers refused to report for their shifts at the River Rich factory because 25 union representatives had been banned from returning to work. According to police officials, the military police moved in when workers tried to stop the factory owner's car. By the end of last week, around 30 injuries were reported from various confrontations.

The *Phnom Penh Post* reported that the workers in Kandal province took action on September 18 in

defence of the delegates, defying employers' notices on factory walls warning of automatic sackings if there were no a return to work by the following morning. Industry representatives estimated that as of September 23, 7,000 workers were defying court orders to return to work.

The unions called on the government to intervene. Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union general secretary Ek Sopheakdey said labour leaders had on September 20 appealed to the government to allow the return to work of the delegates.

However, as reported in the *Phnom Penh Post* on September 21, Prime Minister Hun Sen signed a directive for government officials to cooperate with employers in pursuing legal action against leaders of the September 13-16 strikes and ordered law enforcement officers to prevent any resumption of the strikes.

On September 24 and 25, employers began firing those taking action in defence of the delegates. According to union representatives, 3,300 workers were sacked in Kandal province for striking in defiance of court orders.

Goldfame Enterprise factory delegate Keo Boeun said that workers there had agreed to end their strike on September 23 but when workers arrived for their shift the following day they were told they had been fired.

This week, as the tripartite government-union-employer talks began, Social Affairs Minister Ith Sam Heng called for suspended workers to be reinstated but some employers have ignored this request. Winner Garment Factory representative Lim Phengdsam said the plant had no plans to reinstate suspended workers, citing lack of work.

Employers have claimed that the September 13 to 16

strikes cost the industry \$15 million and resulted in the cancellation of overseas orders. At the Goldfame Enterprise plant, workers have this week been allowed to return but were told there is no work. As a result, 2,000 workers were idle, according to union delegate Chea Thida.

Sam Heng's call for reinstatements followed a letter sent to Cambodia's commerce minister by five major foreign corporations: Adidas, Levi Strauss, Gap Inc, Hennes and Mauritz and the Walt Disney Company. These clothing giants, which have made billions in profits by exploiting cheap labour in Cambodia, fear that the regime is losing control over the working class.

The letter appealed for the government, unions and employers to work together to restabilise the situation: "As buyers in Cambodia it is important that we can see mature industrial relations taking place, and that the process respects and includes all parties and stakeholders."

At Monday's talks, it became clear that the union officials were working for just such an outcome. It was agreed that a committee would be established to conduct the negotiations, with five union representatives, five from the employers and two government officials. Cambodian Confederation of Trade Unions official Vong Sovann said senior union leaders would be nominated, including Confederation president Ath Thun.

The committee was due to begin work on September 29. Despite the virtual lockouts in some factories, the unions were urging calm. Although the government has set no timetable for the negotiations to be completed, the Confederation position was that all strikes would be cancelled pending the final outcome, as long as all workers were reinstated and legal action dropped.

The employers have flatly ruled out any change to the minimum wage increase, which was due to come into effect this month. GMAC secretary Loo said: "We shut the door for the minimum wage, but we always made it very clear we will negotiate the other allowances after October."

Labour Confederation head Ath Thun said he accepted that the employers would not allow any wage rise, but the unions would seek other concessions. Among those being mooted by union officials are daily food allowances and seniority payments. In effect, the unions have repudiated the wage claim on which the

September strike movement was based.



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