

Cambodian security forces shoot striking garment workers

John Roberts
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At least four workers have been shot dead, after Cambodian military police opened fire yesterday on striking workers blocking the road near the Canadia Industrial Park in the southern suburbs of the capital Phnom Penh. The national strike for higher pay involving tens of thousands of garment workers began on December 24.

Human rights group LICADHO described the incident as “horrific” and said its own investigation had found that four people had been killed and 21 wounded. The group’s director Naly Pilorge condemned “the appalling use of extreme lethal force by security forces” and called for an end to the use of live ammunition against civilians.

Yean Sothear who had suffered head injuries, told the *Phnom Penh Post*: “The workers didn’t want violence. We just wanted to block the road ... the police attacked us and shot us. Most of the workers were injured. My friend went to the nearby hospital, but the police ordered them not to treat them—that’s why they were angry.”

As of last night 11 workers had been arrested.

City police official Chuon Narin put the number of dead at three and blamed workers, saying that they had thrown stones and petrol bombs at police. However, the use of automatic weapons was a deliberate attempt to terrorise workers after the government set Thursday as the deadline to end the strike.

The violence yesterday followed a series of police assaults on Thursday afternoon, including at the Korean-owned Yakjin factory where workers and their supporters were subjected to severe beatings and dragged away by baton-wielding police. Five hundred police in riot gear had moved into the area but the protests resumed Friday morning. Yakjin produces clothing for Gap and Walmart.

National Military Police spokesman Kheng Tito defended the use of force. “We’re just doing our jobs. We fear the security situation, so we have to crackdown on them. If we allow them to continue the strike, later on, it will become messy and more complicated to control.”

The government is also threatening to take legal action against the unions and workers. Officials warned this week that unions could have their licences suspended or cancelled and union leaders could face penalties.

Most of the country’s 500 garment factories, which supply US and European retailers, are on strike demanding that their monthly wage be increased to \$US160 from the current \$80. The Asia Floor Wage Alliance, a grouping of trade unions and labour rights activists, has estimated that a living wage for Cambodia would be \$283. Workers are facing sharply rising prices, including rents and electricity.

The strikes involve most of the industry’s 400,000 workers, many of whom are women. The size of the strike is unprecedented and part of growing resentment over the low wages and appalling conditions enforced by the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) government of Prime Minister Hun Sen. From January to November, there were 131 recorded strikes by garment workers compared with 121 for the whole of 2012.

On Tuesday the Labour Ministry slightly increased an earlier offer to increase pay by 25 percent to \$100. But Labour Minister Heng Sour warned that there would be no more negotiation and called for an end to the strike by Thursday. On Thursday, the government began moving military units and riot police to factories around the capital.

Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union president Ath Thorn offered to

continue the negotiations and call off further protests. “But if their response is no, we will continue with the protest,” he said.

The size of the strike and the determination of workers has shaken the Hun Sen regime. The industry turned over more than \$5 billion in the first 11 months of 2013, up 22 percent from the same period in 2012, and occupies a central place in the national economy, along with footwear manufacture.

The government is under pressure from factory owners to end the strike. In comments to Reuters, Cheath Khemera, an official with the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia (GMAC), estimated that each factory was losing \$20,000 to \$30,000 a day in production. “This really impacts the industry seriously,” he said.

The GMAC sent a letter to the government on Thursday asking for permission for their members to export capital equipment to other countries, stating that some of its members were unable to operate in Cambodia. The move underscores the cut-throat competition to drive down costs that pits workers in Cambodia against those in other cheap labour platforms in Asia and elsewhere.

The opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) led by Sam Rainsy has latched onto the strike as a means of pressing its demands for Hun Sen to resign. Amid widespread opposition to the government, the CNRP greatly increased its seats to 55, compared to 68 for the ruling CPP. Rainsy has accused the government of rigging the outcome and is demanding an international inquiry and new elections.

The CNRP is boycotting the parliament creating an ongoing political standoff. The opposition was due to meet with the government yesterday over the deadlock but cancelled the meeting to take advantage of the strike. The opposition is planning another protest rally tomorrow.

Rainsy, a right-wing populist, has offered to meet the demands of garment workers for a monthly wage of \$160. He has condemned the violence and started visiting the injured workers in hospital. “The CNRP will do its best to show solidarity with the workers. On the 5th [of January] more people will [the protest],” he declared.

However, the opposition has no fundamental differences with Hun Sen’s policy of transforming

Cambodia into a cheap labour platform and would quickly dump its promises if it came to power. The CNRP, like the CPP, wants to further open up the economy for more foreign investment.

The election deadlock involves rival sections of the Cambodian ruling elite: the pro-Western Rainsy is orientated to Washington, while Hun Sen has been more aligned with China. Both factions are organically hostile to an independent movement of the working class and would not hesitate to join together if need be to ruthlessly suppress any significant threat to investment and profits.



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