

# Cambodian garment workers forced back to work

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Cambodian garment industry workers reportedly began returning to work on Monday in the 500 factories affected by a 15-day strike for higher wages. The garment factory association claimed that 65–70 percent of the 300,000 striking workers returned to factories by Tuesday.

The strike's collapse followed a violent military police crackdown last week by Prime Minister Hun Sen's government that left four workers confirmed dead, more than 20 seriously injured and at least 23 detained, facing serious criminal charges. The prisoners are being kept in the country's toughest jail, Correctional Centre 3, outside the capital Phnom Penh, where their relatives have been unable to contact them.

As workers trickled back to work, soldiers in jeeps armed with machine guns continued to patrol the area around Veng Sreng Boulevard in Phnom Penh's Canadia Industrial Park, where the most violent confrontation took place last Friday. Nearby workers' areas emptied as many workers returned to their rural villages after the leaders of the seven union groups involved in the strike called off protests on Friday.

Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia secretary-general Ken Loo said most of the factories affected had re-opened by Monday, though many workers had not returned to their workplaces because they were still in their home villages and towns.

Loo expressed the employers' gratitude for the government's bloody repression. He told the garment industry website *just-style*: "We are convinced that when they [workers] see that the government is able to maintain law and order they will return to their workplaces within the next few days."

Loo added that as long as the government "continues to demonstrate its ability and willingness to maintain law and order ... the damage done to the industry and

the blow dealt to investor confidence will be repairable and, in the long run, this will even have a positive impact."

Much was at stake for the Cambodian ruling elite. Employer groups estimated the cost of the 15-day strike at around \$200 million. The country's largest employer, the garment sector generated \$US5 billion in export earnings in the first 11 months of 2013.

Over the weekend, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) government intensified its crackdown. It banned all demonstrations, and violently broke up a Phnom Penh rally site of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). CNRP leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sohka were summoned to appear before a court on January 14 on charges of "provoking social unrest." (See: "Cambodian government bans rallies and protests").

On Tuesday the CPP, which has ruled the country since 1979, issued its first statement on the repression. National Assembly president Heng Samrin, flanked by Hun Sen and CPP president Chea Sim, made clear that the CPP would tolerate no threat to Cambodia's position as a cheap labour platform for foreign investors and local manufacturers.

Samrin warned in thinly veiled terms that the crackdown was far from over. The CPP, he said, "will do everything possible for the sake of defending the elected National Assembly and the Royal Government, the constitution and democracy."

The union leaderships involved in the strike, bear the most direct responsibility for its defeat. The strike began on December 24, when the government proposed to double minimum monthly wage from \$80 to \$160 over five years to 2018, starting with an 18 percent rise to \$95 in April.

Angry garment workers, who live in abject poverty,

rejected this and demanded the whole \$160 immediately. According to the union and human rights group, Asia Floor Wage Alliance, a living wage for Cambodia would be \$283.

The government then increased its offer to \$100 from February, and set a deadline of January 2 to end the strike. On that day, the regime began to move riot police and military units to factory areas.

Even as this was taking place, the only perspective of the union leaders was to plead for further negotiations with the government. Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union president Ath Thorn offered to continue the talks and call off workers' protests.

This left the strikers unprepared for the attacks launched on them, and soon led to a sellout by the union leaders. Once the military violence began, National Independent Federation Textile Union leader Ken Chheanglang said: "We don't want to see more lives lost through violent suppression. We appeal to workers to return to work and earn their wages while we decide our next strategy."

This is far from the first time that the unions have betrayed garment workers, who have been engaged in repeated struggles over the past few years, including a previous national strike over the minimum wage in 2010, which then stood at \$56 per month. Union leaders called off that strike less than a week after it began, after the government raised the minimum wage to a pitiful \$61.

Having latched onto the latest strike for their own political purposes, the CNRP leaders, Rainsy and Sohka, helped shut down the struggle. The CNRP has boycotted the parliament since making gains in July's national elections. It is demanding new elections, an international inquiry into election irregularities and Hun Sen's resignation.

In order to increase the pressure on the Hun Sen regime, Rainsy, a veteran right-wing and pro-Western politician, promised to grant the \$160 wage rise, and offered to organise a mass rally in support of the garment workers last Sunday. Once the crackdown began, Rainsy called off the proposed rally.

The CNRP initially cancelled negotiations with the CPP for a so-called political solution to the election grievances. Rainsy said talks could only resume when the government stopped employing threats and

violence. On Tuesday, however, he said the opposition was "ready to meet, to solve the rest of these problems at all levels."

Far from defending the interests of garment workers, the CNRP, like the CPP, wants to further open up the economy for more foreign investment. In office, Rainsy would just as quickly dump his promise to grant the workers' pay demand, and back the use of force to suppress any threat to profits.



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