

Workers go unpaid as construction sector slows

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Unpaid workers walk out of a construction site in Phnom Penh, June 18. Panha Chhorpoan



More than 40 construction workers held a strike this week after going months without pay while working at the site of the DNC Mall in Phnom Penh's Tuol Kok district. in just one example of the toll that the recent



economic slowdown is taking on construction laborers.



Klang Ra, a 42-year-old construction worker, said that he and a small group of other workers had held several strikes before, but on June 16, more than 40 workers joined in their protest against Yuti Building Decoration Engineering Cambodia Co Ltd and the owner of DNC Mall Hong Ding Xing Tain Di.



"About 100 of us have not received our salary for three months since before Khmer New Year," Ra said, adding that the Chinese-owned companies had not given them a reason why they had not been paid.

He said that on June 15, Tuol Kok district officials visited the worksite and told construction workers that they will negotiate with the director of Yuti and owner of DNC Mall.

"We want the construction company and DNC Mall owner to find a solution and pay us the salary owed for three months," Ra said. "For three months, myself and other workers have had to borrow money from our foreman to buy food each month."

Ra and other workers were hoping for a solution soon after Yuti and DNC Mall representatives held a meeting on June 19.

"If Yuti company and DNC Mall cannot solve this problem, we will appeal to Tuol Kok district [officials] and if Tuol Kok district cannot solve it, we will request a union for construction workers to help us find a solution," Ra said.

Another worker at the site, Meas Chantith, 40, said that he and three others had also gone unpaid.

"I also joined the protest on June 16 because the company [Yuti] did not pay us for three months," Chantith said. "The total salary for my three members and I for three months was more than \$1,000 and the company did not pay us."

He said that while he went unpaid, his family had borrowed \$600 to cover food and living expenses because the construction work was their only income.

"Please, I ask the company to pay us the salary because we don't have money to buy food," Chantith said.

DNC Mall Hong Ding Xing Tain Di could not be reached for comment, but the developer had issued a statement on June 16 attempting to explain the lack of payments to workers by saying that Shi Jianchuan, the manager of a third company, Xin Sheng Can Yin Co, was in charge of the project.

However, Shi told local media that the recent strikes for wages does not concern Xin Sheng Can Yin Company, because they had handed over construction responsibilities to Yuti, despite some media reports to the contrary.

In a statement issued by DNC Mall June 17, the company reiterated it had signed the construction responsibilities over to Yuti on August 1, 2019, and paid the contractor accordingly. The statement said that Yuti had faced internal issues preventing them from paying workers on time, and called on Yuti to solve the problem immediately.

A representative of Yuti company who gave his name only as Huor, said that Yuti could not pay workers because DNC Mall was behind on its payments.

"On Monday next week, the owner of DNC Mall and main contractor company [Yuti] and representatives will hold a meeting at Tuol Kok district, so wait for the result on that day," Huor said.

The failure to pay workers at the DNC Mall site is just one of many cases in which workers in the 260,000-strong Cambodian construction sector are suffering amid the global economic slowdown resulting from the spread of Covid-19.

Knun Tharo, program manager at labor rights group Central, said that although DNC Mall was a prime example, there were many other cases, such as a supermarket construction site on National Road 5 in Phnom Penh's Russei Keo district in which the head of the contracting company had received funds from the developer then fled. A group of workers at that site also protested for their wages earlier this week.

"Since March, when Covid-19 began to spread, there have been four construction sites, mostly run by Chinese companies, which have not paid salary to workers," Tharo said.

Their situation is compounded by the fact that most workers do not have a National Social Security Fund, so they can't receive free hospital services or other forms of government assistance, he added.

"The government should improve mechanisms for construction site inspections and implement the Labor Law," Tharo said. "For example: they need to set a specific time to pay the salary and to go down to inspect safety and security measures for workers."

Sok Kin, president of the Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC), said his union was currently helping unpaid laborers at several sites, and added that his union would intervene in the DNC Mall case if no compromise was reached in the upcoming meeting.

"If there was a problem with workers, the owner of the building site must find the solution for the workers because the owner should be held responsible over the contractor," Kin said. "If they don't find a solution, we will send a complaint to the Land Management Ministry. But for now, we will await the solution from DNC Mall and Yuti company."

He said BWTUC was also helping in three more cases of unpaid labor in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap since the outbreak of Covid-19, including the Russei Keo supermarket site. He said that in Siem Reap province alone, more than 1,000 BWTUC union members have been suspended. Some were paid partial wages of \$70 per month, but are still struggling as construction workers do not qualify for the \$40 government subsidy payments provided to garment and tourism industry workers.

Land Management Ministry spokesman Seng Loth could not be reached for comment. In the first half of 2020, the ministry had reported that there were 1,116 registered construction projects with a total investment capital of more than \$2.57 billion in the nation, compared with the same period in 2019 in which there were 1,099 projects with an investment capital of over \$1.70 billion, amounting to a capital increase of 51.25 percent.

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