



Staff of ex-hotel used for coronavirus quarantine protest for pay

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Former employees of The Great Duke hotel protest in front of the Labor Ministry in Phnom Penh on Friday. Panha Chhorpoan



About 50 former employees of Phnom Penh's old InterContinental Hotel, which was sold and then shuttered last year and is now being kept as a hospital ward for Covid-19 victims, protested outside the Labor Ministry on Friday to demand unpaid benefits.



Known as "The Great Duke" when it closed December 31, the five-star hotel had run for most of its 23



years under the banner of the British multinational InterContinental before being sold. When it ultimately shut, not all staff were paid out contractual benefits.



With the agreement of the owner, the Health Ministry and Prime Minister Hun Sen said last month that the empty hotel would be kept as a hospital and quarantine ward for victims of coronavirus if regular hospitals reach beyond capacity.

A petition submitted by the Cambodian Tourism Workers' Union (CTWU) to the Labor Ministry at the protest on Friday asked for the authorities to help them secure unpaid benefits due to 152 employees, in line with a February 20 Arbitration Council ruling.

"These former staff and their families are facing difficulties and owe debt because of their loss of employment," it says. "The employees of the Great Duke Hotel Phnom Penh have decided to gather in front of the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training to appeal to the labor minister to help solve and push the hotel — especially the tycoon Khov Sambath, the hotel owner — to pay out the compensation to his former staff."

CTWU deputy secretary-general Da Chanmon said ministry officials had assured the protestors and union leaders that they would forward the issue to the minister.

"If there is still not a resolution from the labor minister, we will bring the petition to the cabinet of Prime Minister Hun Sen and other relevant institutions," Chanmon said.

The union official, who also worked at the hotel, said many of the former employees had ongoing costs to cover and had not expected their contracts to be cut short, leaving them jobless. He said the least The Great Duke owners could do is pay out their dues.

"Now we are lacking money to spend to live every day, and we also owe the private banks, so we need money to pay back the banks," Chanmon said. "I borrowed nearly \$2,000 to buy a motorbike for my daughter while I was working at this hotel.

"The bank still always demands payments every month," he said.

Chanmon added it was a very precarious time to be out of work and with no money.

"Even though the Covid-19 disease is spreading, we think that the problem of starvation is even more immediate than [any concerns about] Covid-19," he said.

Nin Vannak, a deputy secretary-general of the Committee for the Resolution of Strikes at the Labour Ministry, said that he had received a petition from the employees of the Great Duke and had sent the petition to the labor minister to make a decision.

"The ministry will speed this up to find a resolution for them, so, please, all employees: Keep quiet to wait for a resolution from the ministry," Vannak said.

Ly Tayseng, a lawyer representing The Great Duke, could not be reached for comment.



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