



Garment factories accused of union busting under cover of Covid-19

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Workers walk across a garment factory in Phnom Penh on Wednesday. Panha Chhorpoan



Garment factory owners have been accused of attempting to cull union representatives and members from



their workplaces under cover of widespread Covid-19 terminations, with one official even arrested after criticizing lay-offs.



The economic slowdowns in Europe and the U.S., which constitute the bulk of the market for Cambodia's export-oriented garment industry, have caused many factories to temporarily suspend or outright terminate their workers.



But union leaders say some factory owners are targeting workers who have taken on roles organizing their colleagues — as well as those who are merely members of independent workers unions — in an effort to reduce unionized labor on the factory floor and intimidate others from organizing in future.

Kong Atith, head of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU), which is the largest independent union in the country, pointed at two factories in Kandal province he said laid off dozens of union officials.

"The Crystal Martin and QMI factories fired between 30 and 40 union leaders and activists during this Covid-19 disease," Atith said, noting it was against the Labor Law for factories to discriminate against workers who organize. "I recognize the situation is difficult but they should be making decisions based on the law."

Atith said the union reps and members who were laid-off had worked at the factories for years. In contrast, he said, more recently hired junior workers had been retained. "The Ministry of Labor's inspections team must go down to inspect these factories where they fired the union leaders and activists," he said.

Khul Samreth Phearum, a 47-year-old member of CCAWDU at the QMI factory in Kandal's Ang Snuol district, said that she and three other members of the union were called into the factory's administration office last month and terminated.

She said it was clear the group was selected due to their unionizing and that the termination was meant to send a message to other workers in the factory.

"They ordered us to thumbprint letters of termination without telling us any reason," Phearum said. "They had security guards brought into the office who were different to the usual guards — it seemed like we committed a crime."

"This was discrimination against the union from the factory owner," she said.

The QMI garment factory could not be reached for comment.

Yang Sophorn, the head of the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Union (CATU), said that four of her members were also terminated from the Golden Apparel factory in Kompong Chhnang province and the Roo Hsing factory in Phnom Penh for "inciting workers to commit crimes" over their unionizing on the factory floor.

"They had no evidence to show that they committed any mistake," she said, explaining that the union representatives were now in dire financial straits.

More than 1,000 of officials and members of the Collective Union of Movement of Workers (CUMW), another independent union, had also been laid-off since the Covid-19 slowdown started, said its secretary-general, Preap Monysovann.

Monysovann pointed, in particular, to two workers: Dy Phors, who he said was CUMW's leader at the Shuang Li factory in Svay Rieng province, and Soy Sros, who had been its leader at the Superl Holdings in Kompong Speu province.

Phors, he said, was laid-off with "hundreds" of other union-member workers.

"The factory accused her of not respecting the principles of the factory because she took time during work hours to do something personal," Monysovann said, referring to her organizing work. "The company abused the contract [which says] that the company promises not to do anything interfering in the union's work."

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But Monysovann said the case of Sros was more severe

He said that Sros was a clear case of a factory targeting a worker for their union activities. She was for producing “fake news” over a Facebook post on April 2 accusing the factory of illegally laying off workers against government policy.

Sros was then charged with “incitement to commit felonies” and sent to pre-trial detention. Her post accused Superl of “disrespecting the recommendations of Prime Minister Hun Sen [by] terminating the contracts of workers, including a pregnant worker, on the grounds of lacking raw material due to Covid-19.”

The arrest of Sros even attracted the attention of the IndustriALL Global Union, an international coalition of unions, which issued a statement calling on the government to “intermediate” between CUMW and Superl to secure her release.

“Soy Sros was rightfully exercising her freedom of speech to defend the interest of workers laid off by Superl Holdings Ltd,” IndustriALL general-secretary Valter Sanches was quoted as saying in a statement released April 28. “Criminalization of her speech is unacceptable because what she said are mere facts.”

Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia deputy secretary-general Kaing Monika said that any union officials or members who were terminated from their work without legal reasons should file complaints to the authorities.

“If they have a problem like that, they could file a complaint to the Labor Ministry to resolve it,” Monika said, declining to comment on the issue further.

Labor Ministry spokesman Heng Sour could not be reached for comment about the accusations of union-busting under the cover of Covid-19. However, on Radio France International’s Khmer-language radio service on Wednesday, he said only 20 factories had closed due to the economic slowdown caused by the virus.

Another 30 other factories had requested closures, he said. More than 330 factories **had temporarily suspended**, he added, but 103 factories had re-opened, leaving about 110,000 workers still temporarily suspended from work.

976 views

 garment worker

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