

Amid Covid-19, thousands of garment workers protest for pay

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A group of 200 workers march to the Kandal Provincial Court in Takhmao City on July 13 to submit a petition asking that the court remove an injunction preventing them from being paid by their former factory owner. Panha Chhorpoan



Thousands of workers at 12 shuttered garment and footwear factories have protested this year after owners have failed to pay them the salaries and benefits they are owed as the global Covid-19 pandemic has caused hundreds of factory suspensions.

Labor representatives say that many workers have not received wages and compensation pay from owners who closed their factories on short notice, while a recent government directive waived the requirement for owners to fulfil some benefits.

Khun Tharo, program manager of the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (Central) said that 12 factories employing a total of nearly 15,000 people have closed.

“Twelve factories have been shuttered and among them, some had provided compensation for workers and other factories did not,” Tharo said. “And some workers still have been continuing to protest.”

The factories that have held demonstrations to ask for the government’s help in receiving payments include Hana (Cambodia) 1 factory in Phnom Penh, New Best Global Textile Co., Ltd in Kampong Speu province, Dignity Knitter and Eco Base factories in Kandal province, and Thai Ya Garment factory also in Kandal province.

However, representatives of two factories, Hana 1 and New Best Global Textile, say that all payments owed to workers were settled on July 10, while Thai Ya factory says it resolved its pay issues on July 15. Workers at Dignity Knitter and Eco Base factories have yet to receive wages or benefit pay.

Tharo said that one of the main reasons factory workers were losing out on benefit payments was due to a directive sent by the Labor Ministry to GMAC in June stipulating that factories that suspended operations or closed due to Covid-19 did not need to provide workers notice payments or compensation, in opposition to the Labor Law.

“Joblessness is making garment workers’ lives very challenging in this economy, especially workers who lost their jobs when their factories closed and the owners did not pay them based on Labor Law,” he said, adding that many were also struggling with daily living expenses and mounting debt.

One example is the sudden closure of Dignity Knitter and Eco Base factories in Kandal province, where more than 1,000 workers have been waiting for compensation since the two factories, which have the same owner, suspended operations in March.

Phin Sophea, a Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union representative who was employed at Dignity Knitter factory, said workers had not received a solution despite promises made by provincial authorities. On July 13, workers had submitted a petition asking the government for help in dissolving a court injunction that is preventing equipment at the factories from being sold to pay workers.

Sophea said that on July 17, Ou Ratana, a deputy secretary-general of the Committee for the Resolution of Strikes at the Labour Ministry had informed him that the provincial court had dissolved the injunction after the July 13 protest. However, he said another Chinese group had filed a request to the court this week asking for a new injunction, claiming the factories’ assets should be used to pay a debt owed by the owners to them instead.

“So the case of Dignity Knitter and Eco Base factories is still complicated and we have been waiting for a solution for a long time,” Sophea said. “Please, we ask the government and Samdech Hun Sen help to intervene to solve this problem for our workers because we are struggling every day.”

Other union officials say that while progress is being made to find a solution for unpaid workers, the main objective should be ensuring the recovery of the garment industry as a whole.

Som Aun, president of the National Union Alliance Chamber of Cambodia said that union representatives,

garment and footwear associations and interministerial groups were holding meetings seeking a resolution for protesting workers.

“At this time, three parties including workers representatives, factory representatives and interministerial groups need to join to solve this and find an equitable solution,” Aun said adding that at the moment, it was unreasonable to follow the Labor Law completely when so many factories are not operating as normal.

“What is important is how we can guarantee that our garment sector will process again normally, so it depends on if the Covid-19 situation eases,” Aun added. “I think it is a problem that is more difficult for the garment sector than for others.”

Ath Thorn, president of the Cambodian Labor Confederation, said that most issues between garment workers and factory owners occurred because the owners had shut their business without paying salaries and benefits.

“The factories have not accurately calculated compensation and some workers were not paid,” he said, adding that the government should help preserve jobs in the garment industry by guaranteeing benefits for workers and should also facilitate the eventual reopening of factories.

Labor Ministry spokesman Heng Sour could not be reached for comment.

Nin Vannak, a deputy secretary-general of the Committee for the Resolution of Strikes at the Labor Ministry said that he had explained to workers who had submitted petitions at the ministry that unemployment was on the rise in many countries, and that the problem was not unique to Cambodia.

“I always tell them that the Labor Ministry has a National Employment Agency, so if workers are interested in finding new work opportunities, they can go to the Labor Ministry or to the agency in Phnom Penh or the provinces,” Vannak said.

He added that he did not remember how many factories have submitted a petition to the ministry seeking a resolution on their wages this year.

Ken Loo, secretary-general of GMAC, called on garment workers and factory owners to follow the law.

“Please, we ask that workers demand payments based on the law,” Loo said, giving as an example workers at Hana 1 factory, who had asked for compensation beyond what the Labor Ministry’s recent directive specifies.

“We also told all factory owners that before they close their factories, please follow the procedures of the law and if we can provide payments to workers, we must do it. But if the factories are bankrupt, please sell the equipment in the factory to provide payments for workers,” Loo added.

According to a statement from the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia, since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, about 400 factories in the apparel, footwear and travel goods sectors have suspended operations and more than 150,000 workers have lost their jobs.

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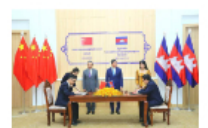
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