

# Siem Reap labor department warns hotel union leaders over protests

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Employees of Le Meridien Angkor hotel protest outside the establishment on August 7 over a labor dispute involving reduced wages and the termination of three union activist. Panha Chhorpoan



The Siem Reap provincial labor department on August 6 warned the leaders of two trade unions they had violated the union law by organizing protests at Le Meridien Angkor Hotel, which has been embroiled in a labor dispute since three union activist employees were terminated in July.

Touch Kosal, president of the Cambodia Tourism Workers' Union Federation (CTWUF) said the labor department had sent identical letters to him and Le Meridien Angkor Trade Union President Ly Linda warning them for allegedly organizing illegal strikes and blocking a public road outside the hotel, both of which violate the union law.

"In case you do not change your actions or repeatedly commit the actions mentioned in this warning letter, your professional organization could be sued and dissolved or face other measures based on the law," the letter reads.

Kossal insisted that the demonstrations had not broken any laws.

"I think that warning the federation or union is incorrect because they accused us of blocking the public to the hotel but in fact we did not block the road," Kosal said, adding that hotel workers had protested inside the gates of the hotel compound.

Kosal said that the letter also accused the unions of organizing illegal strikes, but the two union leaders say they had given seven days' notice before beginning strikes on August 6, as is required in the Union Law.

He added that the provincial labor department had invited three union activists to negotiate with hotel representatives on August 7, but talks broke down when workers continued to demand that the provincial labor department record the union members' case as part of a collective issue over wages, rather than an individual dispute. On August 3, the provincial department had hosted a similar meeting which also did not reach a resolution.

"After that the workers have gone to protest in front of the hotel from the morning until the evening" on August 7, Kosal said.

On July 9 and 10, the hotel terminated three activists with Le Meridien Angkor Trade Union, accusing them of inciting workers after the three had collected thumbprints asking that their salaries be reduced by 20 percent instead of 35 percent due to a loss of business resulting from Covid-19.

Pheng Chheangly, chief of inspection and conflict resolution at the Siem Reap provincial labor department who had sent the letters to the two unionists, said the workers' current strike is illegal, as workers can't strike until they have reached an initial conclusion in their discussions with the department and hotel.

He said that workers attended talks at department, but walked out of the negotiating room to protest outside the building.

"This morning, they went to protest in front of the provincial labor department again...and then they went to protest in front of the hotel," Chheangly said.

"Please all workers before they hold a strike, they need to check the law first," he added.

Chheangly said the department had yet to reach an agreement between hotel workers and management as the employees were insisting the issue of wages and the unionists' terminations be included in the same collective dispute.

"We see this case based on the law...a collective dispute is a collective dispute and an individual dispute is an individual dispute because we cannot combine individual cases into a collective case," Chheangly said.

He noted that if the provincial labor department could not resolve the case, workers would have to file a complaint at the provincial court regarding their collective dispute over wages, while the individual dispute for

the union activists' termination would be sent to the Arbitration Council.

Ly Linda, president of the Tourism Workers' Union of Le Meridien Angkor Hotel said the provincial labor department has no right to issue a letter to him because his union has followed the law.

He said that on August 7, about 20 workers held a banner in front of the labor department before moving to protest during the afternoon at the hotel, where they were joined by about 30 more workers.

"We will continue to protest because we want to have a solution," Linda said. "Ninety-six workers among 170 workers [total at the hotel] thumbprinted to demand the three union activists be allowed to return to work."

"As they [the provincial labor department] are the authorities and guardians, they need to go down to see by themselves because they do not listen to the people who report to them," Linda said. "We still demand the provincial labor department assess the dispute as a collective dispute but they do not agree."

Le Meridien Angkor General Manager Sabreena Jacob said by email that due to the hotel's closure from April to June, salary reductions based on seniority and voluntary retirement packages were a necessary measure that a majority of employees found acceptable.


She added that the three union members who had been terminated had broken the law.

"The three terminated employees have violated the company rules and regulations including the Cambodian Labor law," she said via email on August 7. "Despite being informed by the hotel and the governmental authorities that their joint actions constitute illegal activities, the three terminated employees continued to participate in the illegal actions."

"We are disappointed that they chose to participate in illegal strikes, instead of having discussions with the company and government authority when invited to do so," she continued. "Our company respects and is following the Cambodian Labor Law on this issue."

On August 4, Siem Reap Provincial Tourism Department Director Ngov Sengkak said that only 64 of 230 hotels and 85 of 204 guesthouses in the province were still operating, and that their reopening would depend on when Covid-19 cases decline.

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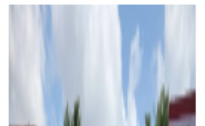
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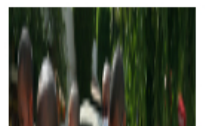
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