



Unions, government, factories prepare for minimum wage negotiations

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Ath Thorn, president of the Cambodian Labor Confederation speaks to workers during the Labor Day celebration in Phnom Penh, Picture taken on May 1, 2019. CamboJA/ Pring Samrang

Minimum wage negotiations for garment and footwear workers for 2022 will go ahead, officials said, in spite of economic challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The tripartite meeting between representatives of workers, the industry, and government will begin September 7. Union leaders are scheduled to hold an internal meeting this Friday, to discuss their strategy and requests.

Labor Ministry spokesman Heng Sour confirmed the meeting will start in September of the second week. Attendees include those from the Garment Manufacturer's Association in Cambodia (GMAC), unions, and the Labor Ministry.

"Tripartite meetings will meet in September, and the discussion is based on the internal issue of each party," he said.

Sour declined to preview what the ministry will be pushing for in negotiations.

"Please to see [tripartite meeting] right now the working group is processing documents and discussion," he said.

Last year, the National Council on Minimum Wage approved a \$190 minimum wage for workers in 2021, marking no increase over the previous year. Unions had requested a raise of nearly \$12, while employers asked for a cut of \$17.

The government then decided to add a \$2 raise, bringing the wage to \$192, saying it had to take into consideration the economic strain the pandemic had placed on the industry, with production materials in short supply and orders having dropped significantly.

Ath Thorn, president of the Cambodian Labor Confederation — one of the country's biggest unions — said he expects another difficult negotiation, with the pandemic hitting Cambodia even harder in 2021.

"The negotiations will be held as normal, but for outcome we do not know the possibility yet, because we are still working on this issue," he said.

"What I am [predicting is] a raise of at least 3 dollars, it would be good because this year it is difficult because of the COVID-19 crisis," Thorn said, adding that because next year is an election year he is more hopeful of workers' prospects.

He said that the unions' technical working group is now working on a report on the cost of living, inflation, and competition, as well as incomes of factory industry's owners, and will use that as a guide to figuring out how much to ask for in negotiations.

Yang Sophorn, president of Cambodian Alliance Trade Union said that she can't predict whether there will be a rise of minimum wage, but said negotiations must go forward, even as employers say they face challenges during the pandemic.

"Workers are facing more hardship than employers during the COVID-19 crisis," she said, adding that the current salary of workers is too low to meet basic daily expenses and suitable living conditions.

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"I have known that garment workers are confronting a lot of challenges, but investors have also lost incomes," he said.

"The main important thing is to guarantee investors still continue to run their business because one investor can feed a thousand workers," Monika said.

He said that the actual figures will be disclosed in the tri-partite meeting, and negotiations will explore 12 criteria related to economic and social issues.

"We will discuss deeply with them [unions] to understand each other, and how much should be increased or not," he said.

A report issued by Clean Clothes Campaign last month found that during the Covid-19 outbreak and ensuing lockdown in April and May 2021, "the 784,000 workers employed in Cambodia's apparel, footwear, and leather industry lost an estimated \$109 million in wages." During the first 13 months of the pandemic, "combined with outstanding wages and severance pay... the total amount owed to garment workers in Cambodia is estimated to be a total of US\$ 393 million," the report noted.

Pang Sokry, 54, a garment worker in Phnom Penh, said that workers desperately need higher wages, with their livelihoods significantly impacted by factory closures during the pandemic.

"If it is possible we deserve \$200 to \$230 per month because we have spent a lot on living, including food that is expensive in the market," she said.

"No matter what, I will still accept [the result of the wage meeting] because I only rely on factory work, and nowadays all people are challenged with economics," Sokry said. "If workers can get more salary, it would be better to solve our problems,"

546 views

Cambodian Alliance Trade Union, Cambodian Labor Confederation, Garment Manufacturer's Association in Cambodia, GMAC

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