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# Naga Workers Boycott Amid 'Irregular' Covid-19 Response, Worker Infections

5 min read

Danielle Keeton-Olsen and Tran Techseng | Mon Mar 1, 2021 3:17 pm



Masked guards stand at the front of Naga 2 in Phnom Penh on March 1, 2021, amid a boycott by thousands of staff after some said they tested positive for Covid-19. (Danielle Keeton-Olsen/VOD)

[responsivevoice\_button voice="US English Female"]

Thousands of NagaWorld union and nonunion workers stayed home from work at Phnom Penh's sole casino and hotel complex over the weekend and on Monday as some workers said they had tested positive for Covid-19, but little information was made available by the company, workers said.

Chhim Sithar, president of the NagaWorld workers union, said that around 3,000 workers stayed home from the massive casino complex over the weekend after Health Ministry officials tested some workers with little explanation late Thursday night. More would boycott after some workers said they had tested positive and were hospitalized, she said.

The union put out a statement on Friday evening demanding the company disinfect both Naga 1 and Naga 2 buildings and pay for workers' Covid-19 tests before they would return to work. The statement said the workers found the health response to be "irregular" and had concerns for their safety.

Sithar said the company had not responded to the union's letter, but management had threatened workers' salaries and employment if they did not return to work.

"The problem is the worry of the workers who don't understand [what's happening] and aren't brave enough to boycott because they're worried about their loans and the basic needs," she told VOD.

A member of NagaWorld's cleaning staff, 37, said on Monday morning that he was tested for Covid-19 on Friday and found out he was positive the next day. He's now being treated at a hospital near the Prek Pnov bridge — likely the Phnom Penh Quarantine Center — though his health has been normal so far, he said.

From friends, he's heard that some other employees on the night shift, mostly dealers and food and beverage staff, had tested positive too.

"[I] had just worked on the night shift, telling staff to disinfect for the virus at each session as normal," he said by phone. "But the doctor told us we are infected. We are wondering too. We have no idea where we contracted the virus."

Two 37-year-old Cambodian men were listed among the Health Ministry's announcement of new Covid-19 cases on Sunday, both of them sent to the Phnom Penh Quarantine Center.

Health Ministry spokesperson Or Vandine has not responded to a request for comment.

A reporter who called NagaWorld's number for corporate communications was passed between several different employees before being told by a human resources employee to ask the Health Ministry. An email sent to Naga Corp's corporate communications and investor relations contacts has not been answered.

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Saro Makara, a dealer at Naga 2, said she has been boycotting work since she heard of the potential cases. She was tested for Covid-19, but she said she would not return to work until all workers had their second tests and both buildings were disinfected.

50% "Working there, we are in contact with each other, eat together and rest together at the same place. So we are very afraid, because we already know how the disease spreads," she said.

Makara added that the casino had taken some measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19, such as closing tables to keep social distance, but both buildings were still operating.

As of Monday early afternoon, both Naga 1 and Naga 2 were open, with only a few masked and uniformed guards at the entrance.

Sithar said she was disturbed by the lack of information about the potential cases. Workers first heard there was a threat of Covid-19 late Thursday night, when the casino complex was closed for three hours due to the suspected Covid-19 cases, she said. By 4 a.m. Friday morning, management told workers to return to their posts, she said.

"I think it's very cruel, it's very immoral," she said. "It's about the ethics, they treat the workers like they're less than human."

60% While the workers were first learning of the suspected Covid-19 concerns, the Hong Kong-listed NagaCorp, NagaWorld's parent company, held an extraordinary general meeting on Friday, awarding more shares to the company's executive directors and board leaders. The company's CEO, Chen Lip Keong, is worth more than \$5 billion according to Forbes, and he was naturalized as a Cambodia citizen late last year.

The company, which recorded an average daily net gaming revenue of more than \$1.6 million amid Covid-19 travel restrictions in the third quarter last year, will hold a board meeting on March 8.

Sithar, the president of the 4,000-strong union, said she still was not sure about the total number of workers who tested positive, but she had heard they were mostly from the gaming floor.

She said it was "challenging" to find out more about the cases, and she worries the workers will be accused and charged with producing "fake news" about the outbreak.

70% "It's also frustrating to me, I feel because the Covid-19 virus is not very dangerous [on its own], but the Covid plus pregnancy, plus diabetes, those who have heart disease, plus those who have problems breathing ... among our 8,000 workers, I'm sure many have these [pre-existing] diseases in their body," she said.

The union would send another public letter to management later on Monday, Sithar added, and also write to the Health Ministry about the company's failure to disclose the new Covid-19 cases among workers and take proper action to close and clean the casino complex. The boycotting workers will just stay home, and she said she was considering organizing a meeting with management online.



80% COVID-19, NAGAWORLD

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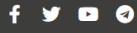
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