

Police block garment workers marching to Hun Sen's house

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Khuon Narim



A group of about 100 workers of Violet Apparel garment march to the Ministry of Labor on July 23 after police officers blocked them from submitting a petition at Prime Minister Hun Sen's house. Panha Chhorpoan



Police and security guards blocked about 100 workers who attempted to march to Prime Minister Hun Sen's house on July 23 to submit a petition seeking a resolution after their factory shut down without providing benefit payments.

Some 50 police officers and Tuol Kork district security guards stopped the workers on Kampuchea Krom Boulevard in Phsar Depot 1 commune while they were on their way to the prime minister's house after departing from the Labor Ministry, where they had first submitted their petition.

The workers decided to proceed to Hun Sen's house as the government had failed to find a solution to their problems after employees had submitted a complaint with the Labor Ministry earlier this month. The Violet Apparel workers are asking that the ministry come to an agreement with the factory owner that would guarantee them seniority indemnity and compensation pay in the wake of the factory's suspension and subsequent closure due to economic strain in the wake of Covid-19.

The workers previously protested at the factory in Phnom Penh in early July, when the owners suddenly announced that the company would close permanently, and would not pay employees full benefits. More than 1,000 workers have been affected by the closure.

"The Labor Ministry just received the complaint and they did not resolve our problems," said Kin Chreb, a 32-year-old employee of the factory who participated in the march.

"We peacefully walked toward uncle's [Hun Sen's] house but they [police] do not allow us to walk," she said.

"We demand that the factory owner pay our compensation and other benefits after closing the factory," Chreb said, adding that workers are owed about \$1,000 each, depending on how long they had worked at Violet Apparel.

"As of now, we have not received anything," she said.

Another worker, Chhor Lin, 34, said she was displeased that authorities and police officials had blocked the group from seeking a resolution from the prime minister.

"Yes, we are angry [that police blocked the march] because what we were doing is in accordance with the law," she said.

"We had no choice but to march to seek help from Samdech Hun Sen because the Labour Ministry has not resolved the problem for us," Lin said.

She added that because the factory had abruptly shut down without warning, providing notice pay was essential.

"All workers have not yet received money since the factory closed," she said. "For me, I am owed about \$2,000."

After police blocked the march, the demonstrators returned to the Labor Ministry where they later met with officials who had promised to find a solution for them.

Ministry spokesman Heng Sour said via Telegram that the ministry was working on the case.

"The ministry will continue to resolve this according to the law," he said, declining to explain further.

Yang Sophorn, president of the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU), said she had begged the Labor Ministry and government leaders to reach a settlement for workers at Violet Apparel factory.

She said that in May, the factory owner had promised to pay workers their last salary and all bonus pay including seniority indemnity payment, notice payment, and compensation. But on July 1, they rescinded their

offer to cover notice payments and compensation, in line with a recent Labor Ministry directive permitting factory owners to forgo bonuses that they can't afford to cover.


"The law clearly states that if the factory closure is unreasonable, workers are owed all benefits such as last salary, seniority, indemnity, notice payments, and compensation," Sophorn said.

"In this circumstance, the workers really need money to support their daily lives," she said.

Earlier this month, the Labor Ministry sent CATU President Sophorn a warning letter for engaging in activities that violate the Law on Trade Unions, accusing her of inciting garment workers to pressure and threaten their employers. The ministry requested that she stop organizing for workers at Violet Apparel (Cambodia) Co., Ltd factory immediately, saying she had broken the law by leading workers in a protest.

According to a GMAC statement from June, about 400 factories have suspended operations and more than 150,000 workers have lost their jobs due to the global Covid-19 outbreak.

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