



# Fired during Covid, Siem Reap airport staff demand bonuses paid in full

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Khuon Narim



Workers laid-off from the Siem Reap International Airport protest to demand bonuses paid in full outside the provincial labor department on Friday. CTWF

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Former staff at the Siem Reap International Airport are demanding entitlements be paid in full after they were laid off due to the coronavirus pandemic, but a provincial official said the 130 workers lost their right to negotiate when they went public with their protest last week.

With their jobs suspended since April, the workers are rejecting a December offer to accept termination and receive 80% of seniority payments owed to them, calling for Cambodia Airports to pay out the entitlements in full.

The employer, in which France's VINCI Airports holds the controlling share, said it would pay 50% of the entitlements to those who did not agree, and has begun to disperse those funds, workers and a union leader said.

"What the company has done is biased and violates our rights as stipulated in article 95 [of the labor law] - they are acting arbitrarily and to suit themselves," said Ly Molin, who has been employed as an air marshal for more than ten years.

After refusing the December agreement, Molin has seen \$5,000 deposited directly to his bank account by his former employer but is claiming the other half of his owed seniority indemnity and compensation for violations of the labor law.

"They terminated us without prior notification.... We used to have money to eat noodles and drink coffee, now we just have hardship and the big problem of paying back banks," he said, adding that he had monthly repayments of about \$500.

Workers say that they were paid 50% of their salaries from April through December - but the employer said that salaries were paid in full to those earning less than \$500 per month and reduced by only 20% for those earning more.

With airport traffic reduced by 99% since April, the company had adapted a range of measures to assist staff, but had now taken the decision to terminate the 130, said Khek Norinda, a spokesman for Cambodia Airports.

"As the situation has taken a turn for the worse, it is unfortunately unavoidable that we have to implement severance program" he said, adding that it was in line with the law and being overseen by the Labour Ministry.

"We held several meetings with the airport union to keep their representatives informed of our plan," he said.

Laid-off employees would be rehired if their positions became viable again and, in the meantime, Cambodia Airports would assist them in finding alternative employment or starting a business, he added.

Thirty-one employees originally suspended in April had since been put back to work in different role, he said.

Article 95 of the labor law lays out a series of steps that employers must take in firing staff when there is a reduction in activities.

While workers contend the legality of the layoffs, authorities have rubber stamped them due to the circumstances, with the pandemic having put an almost-complete halt on tourism.

"Can you imagine a company in the world that had not laid off workers due to the impact of COVID-19?" said Sin Chansereyvutha, spokesman for the State Secretariat of Civil Aviation, reiterating the 99% decrease in landings at the airport.

"The company has good reason to lay off workers, they have honored all contracts and followed the law."

On Friday, about 100 of the laid-off workers took to the streets holding placards to demand that their entitlements be paid in full – and claiming that the employer was attempting to stifle their calls by offering individual settlements rather than negotiating with the group.

Those tactics had undermined the dispute resolution process and cost them their place at the negotiating table, said Pheng Chhengly, chief of the Siem Reap department for resolving labor disputes.

"They prepared a banner before entering the labor department and went live on Facebook, so they have no intention to cooperate," Chhengly said.

"The plaintiffs have not cooperated with officials, so they have given up their rights which we now consider nullified."

In November, the Labor Ministry's dispute resolution committee ruled that the company had the right to lay off workers while its operations were so significantly reduced, Chhengly said.

But the fight for seniority indemnity to be paid in full will go on, according to Ron Ravann, president of the Siem Reap Airport Cambodia Tourism Industry Worker Trade Union.

A new complaint will be filed with the Labor Ministry, he said, after a December 15 complaint saw the ministry rule that disputes should be solved individually.

"It is an injustice that the company has calculated the seniority indemnity at 50%," he said.

449 views

Siem Reap airport

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+ (855) 23 88 23 11

editor@cambojanews.com

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