

ICFTU OnLine...

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Cambodia: Another peaceful worker demonstration meets a tough police crackdown

Phnom Penh, 7 March 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): On Saturday morning, the ICFTU witnessed first-hand a barrage of police violence against a peaceful protesters in Cambodia during a demonstration which brought together approximately 250 workers in front of the Sam Han (Cambodia) Fabric Co Ltd clothing factory in Phnom Penh. As on many occasions subsequent to February's closure of the Sam Han factory, demonstrators gathered to hold a peaceful protest in a bid to secure the severance pay to which they are entitled under Cambodian law. However, workers were not met by their Korean former employer, but rather by nearly 60 armed police officers wearing helmets and carrying shields. The police started hurling insults at the workers which soon turned into threats: "You have no business here, you bunch of f -----; get out of here or we will charge". Police charged on protesters merely one hour later, breaking up the demonstration in the same violent manner with which they have handled previous protests held since the factory closed on 12 February. "We ran away as fast as we could, but two young workers were caught by the police, who hit them with electric truncheons and rifle butts", said Sar Mora, a union leader at the CCAWDU (Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union) which was active at Sam Han factory. "Our two colleagues caught up with us later, one colleague's mouth was bleeding, and the other had very sore ribs. They didn't go to a doctor or to the hospital however, because having lost their jobs they can no longer afford to do so". In their personal accounts to the ICFTU, the workers said that they would not be making complaints to the police because to do so, they would have to confront the very authorities who reacted so violently towards them.

The Sam Han factory employed around 7,000 people until it first closed on 28 October 2004. "Work was suspended for two months", says Sar Mora. "On 3 January 2005, the factory doors reopened and 5,000 workers were given back their jobs, but on 5 February - pay day - the employer told us that the company had no money to pay us. Instead they asked us to wait for a week, until 12 February, and we agreed to do so, just as we had done on several previous occasions. On 11 February, the employer, a South Korean, returned home, supposedly to release the required funds. We went on strike on 12 February to demand the payment of our wages and the severance pay to which we are entitled but on 14 February the authorities told us that Sam Han had been declared bankrupt. The government agreed to pay our wages for January and early February on the employer's behalf, but we're also entitled to severance pay and are demonstrating peacefully in an attempt to keep up the pressure in this regard".

The workers at Sam Han have been confronted with police violence throughout their strike activity. As a result, the workers who even dare to demonstrate is decreasing all the time. According to the union CCAWDU, more than 40 workers have been injured in the various waves of repression, some seriously - one young worker, aged 23, fell into a coma having been beaten by police. Sok Chantha, a former employee at the Sam Han factory and a CCAWDU activist, is just 20 years old but she was also handled aggressively by the authorities. "It happened at the protest held on 22 February where the police used tear gas on us and aggressive force against anyone they caught. One policeman hit me with his rifle butt on the chest and then on the back. My skin instantly turned black where he hit me, but I didn't have the money to go and see a doctor".

Workers at the Sam Han factory had in fact been in fear of losing their jobs for months prior to the factory's closure. "We noticed that the factory's usual clients, like GAP and Walmart, were placing fewer and

fewer orders for clothes", said Sar Mora. "But our working conditions had improved since GAP started placing orders with our boss". Today, those workers who were formerly employed at the Sam Han factory are finding it extremely difficult to make ends meet. The clothing sector, the sole industry which has succeeded in developing in a country racked by corruption, has been under tremendous pressure since the quota system ended on 1 January. The system had previously protected Cambodia and many other countries against unfair competition from China. In fact, today some families have fallen into debt as a result of paying the \$100-dollar bribe required to secure work at a factories similar to Sam Han's. "In the past, having worked for Sam Han was a good reference for finding a job elsewhere", explained Sok Chantha. "Now it puts off other employers who see us as agitators. I managed to find another job, but 10 days later I was fired when my new employer noticed that I'd worked at the Sam Han factory".

The ICFTU condemns the increasingly repressive policy pursued by the Cambodian government against workers who peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression and freedom of association. The right is increasingly being denied in the clothing sector following the end of the commercial agreement between the United States and Cambodia under which the South East Asian country could increase its exports to the US by improving its respect for labour laws and international labour standards. However, 2004 saw the murders of two independent trade unionists were killed in Cambodia - Chea Vichea, the President of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC) who was assassinated on 22 January 2004, and Ros Savannareth, another leading member of FTUWKC, was killed on 7 May 2004. These murders form the centrepiece of an ICFTU complaint submitted to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) last year (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220667&Language=EN>). The ICFTU said that unless the Cambodian authorities immediately stop disproportionate levels of violence against trade union leaders and workers, which, in the past, have resulted in fatalities, and launch serious investigations into existing cases of excessive violence, the country runs the risk of erasing one of the few advantages that it previously enjoyed over its rivals (for example China and Vietnam) in the clothing sector, namely a somewhat better respect for workers' fundamental rights.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0206 or +32 476 621 018.

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