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Cambodia: mounting tension following removal of export quotas

Brussels, 20 April 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): "Tensions are rising in the factories, and mounting trade union repression will tarnish foreign investors' image of the country if it is allowed to persist," says an ICFTU report published today. This report (<http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/LMSrappportCambodiaEN.pdf>) entitled "Cambodia: increasing pressure on trade union rights" provides an update on the situation of the country's workers since the lifting of the textile and garment quotas on 1 January 2005.

The new report explains that there has not yet been a significant deterioration in working conditions inside Cambodia's garment factories since the end of the quota system. But although salaries remain slightly higher than those paid in some competitor countries, they still do not afford workers a decent standard of living.

Outside the factories, the situation has seriously deteriorated over recent months. The Cambodian authorities, bent on pleasing the employers, are violently repressing strikes and protests. It is becoming extremely dangerous to carry out independent trade union activities in Cambodia, as shown by the assassination of two trade union leaders in 2004. The ICFTU also condemns the countless number of cases in which trade unionists and workers holding peaceful protests have been savagely beaten by the police or hired gangsters.

The report published today explains that employers have recently deployed a new tool to repress trade union activities: the filing of legal proceedings against factory union leaders, to make them serve prison sentences or pay extortionate fines. Employers are disregarding labour laws and using criminal law to prosecute workers whose only "offence" is taking part in a peaceful strike. Such actions contravene internationally recognised principles on the right to strike.

One of the reasons behind the mounting tension in Cambodia is the pressure resulting from China's unfair trade practices. Indeed, the outright repression of any form of independent trade union activity in China means that its suppliers are able to offer much better prices and delivery deadlines than their competitors. Yet nothing can excuse the mounting repression of independent trade unionists in Cambodia. "By violently repressing the workers' right to organise unions, to hold peace protests or take strike action, the Cambodian authorities are undermining the foundation on which the country's economy rests: better respect for workers' rights inside the factories is the only significant comparative advantage Cambodia has to offer in relation to its competitors," underlines the ICFTU report. "If the Cambodian authorities really want to help garment sector employers to survive in a quota-free trade environment, they would do better to attack the main obstacles to business for which they are directly responsible, such as the very high level of corruption among public employees and the excessive red tape hampering import-export operations".

The ICFTU has urged the WTO, the international organisation responsible for world trade, to study the consequences of liberalising trade in textiles and garments through the ending of the quota system and to draw up recommendations for future policies. "The WTO must urgently find an effective way of preventing the use of workers' repression as an illegitimate tool to promote higher exports, as is the case in China and export processing zones around the world," concludes the new report.

An interview with Cambodian trade union leader Chea Mouny may be read

at:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221538&Language=EN>

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

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