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Cambodia

# Garment workers revolt

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**The garment industry (which uses imported textiles) has been the fastest growing production sector in the 1990s. About 40 factories, employ over 20,000 workers. Last year, exports (mainly to Europe) brought in \$90 million, or 30% of the national income. Wages make up only 6% of the sale price of these garments.**

These factories are owned by investors from east Asia, using the opportunity of very low wages relative to other countries in the region, lack of any social protection, and eight-year tax holidays. Their home countries's quotas for garment exports to Europe are filled, so they take advantage of Cambodia's unfilled export quota.

Women make up 90% of the workforce in the garment factories. So it is no surprise that Ou Mary, a young woman garment worker was proposed as leader at the 15 December 1996 founding meeting of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, (FTUWKC). [1] The new union's initial objectives are a \$50 (US) per month wage, and a 44 hour, five and half day work week.

Two days later, a strike began at the Chinese-owned Cambodia Garments Limited factory on the road to the airport. Shots were fired against the rally of 3,000 workers. In a first for modern Cambodia, 4,000 workers marched to the National Assembly on 19 December. Workers returned to the factory on 22 December, following negotiations involving Rainsy which promised an increase of pay from \$35 to \$37 per month, and a decrease in hours from 72 to 47 per week, with up to \$1 extra pay for 4 hours overtime.

Strike leaders had been granted a sympathetic audience with the King on 20 December, and on 26 December the government announced an agreement with 36 garment companies for \$40 per month pay, and paid sick leave.

The Gennon factory reached a similar agreement on 30 December, after a strike that began with a march on 24 December, with workers particularly angered at the regular strip searching of young women workers. The Wing Hwa and Integrity factories signed agreements on 4 January.

On 30 December, the Prime Minister declared that "in order to defend the national interest - and interests of both investors and workers - the government will continue to prevent illegal demonstrations incited by politicians who are against the government."

Days later, the Wing Hwa and Integrity factories signed agreements, but the (Hong Kong) owners of the Tack Fat factory threatened to move to Laos or Vietnam, when all 1,000 workers at their Cambodian sewing plant went on strike on 3 January. The factory makes garments for C&A in Britain, and Sears in Canada. Minister of Labour Suy Sem, accused the strikers of "destroying investment and the economy". On 9 January shots were fired at participants attending a rally at the factory. After 12 days of strike, an agreement was signed, but a few days later, 13 women strike leaders were sacked.

In early February there were protests at the Chinese-owned Bluebird factory (demanding an increase in the \$10 per month basic pay). Soldiers locked 150 workers at Broadland factory into the plant to end a strike over unpaid wages. Several weeks later there were similar protests at the United Faith (Hong Kong owned) and Jin Chan factory.

## Unions revive under new labour law

Garment workers have not been the only ones to strike. Although public sector workers do not have the legal right to form unions or strike, associations and beneficial societies do exist among teachers, nurses and civil servants. In some areas, such as in Baktouk in January, teachers have taken strike action after long periods without receiving their \$20 per month salaries.

On 9 February workers at the Sanye tire factory locked up Chinese managers and Embassy officers, and began selling factory products. They had begun their strike on 11 January, in protest at the small amount of money paid to lease the factory and its stocks; until 1993 the factory was a state enterprise partly owned by its 200 workers.

In the coastal province of Kampot, 400 young workers, without any prior union allegiance, occupied the Chakrey Ting Cement Factory for one month, beginning 19 March, defying surrounding police and military. They were protesting disciplinary action against eleven workers, by a new American boss from the Naga Cement consortium. They returned to work after winning their demands.

## Trade unions

Responding, a little too slowly, to the garment workers' struggle, the Cambodian Federation of Trade Unions began to reorganise itself. It was formed in 1979, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge regime, which had sought to eliminate all industry and all urban classes, including workers. Until its last congress in 1989, it was the instrument of the Communist Party and government among workers in the state owned sector. Through the reintroduction of capitalism in the early 1990s, it retained its staff and building, but was unable to recruit and build itself as a union federation that could represent workers in confrontation with the new, mainly foreign, private employers.

CFTU is represented on official bodies, such as the National Training Board. Its former links with the World Confederation of Trade Unions have atrophied, due to lack of finances, though it still manages a few exchange visits with the Lao and Vietnamese union federations.

The CFTU, which is led by Men Sam An, the most senior woman politician in the CPP, has begun to reissue membership cards, mainly to winery, port and transport workers. It is trying to recruit in some of the garment factories, and plans to reorganise among workers in the moribund, (and about to be privatised) rubber plantations.

Worried about the prominence of Sam Rainsy among the garment strikers, Interior Minister, Sar Kheng, has lent his support to the new Cambodian Union Federation, led by Chuon Mom Thol, which claims 2,000 members in 30 factories.

An Independent Free Democratic Union of Cambodian Factory Workers has also been formed, rejecting the political allegiance of the FTUWKC to Sam Rainsy and his party. It is based in the Cambodia Garments Limited factory at Pochentong, where it claims to represent 1,800 of the 4,000-strong workforce. Another "non-aligned" union was formed on 19 January at the Ming Cheong factory, recruiting about a third of the 750 workers after the company demanded production increases without raising the \$1 per day pay. This union has gained support from the Asian-American Free Labor Institute. [\[2\]](#)

Also recently formed is the Cambodian Labour Organisation, an independent Cambodian NGO, led by Seng Pholly, and a group of refugees who returned from camps in Thailand in 1993. CLO has had some financial support from the

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United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It provides Sunday training sessions, and research on industrial issues. Its activists were badly beaten by guards during the strike at the United Faith company on 26 February.

Under Cambodia's new labour law, passed on 10 January, workers will now vote for a single union to represent their workplace in negotiations with employers. It is unclear about how each union can legally register, and when these workplace elections might be held. While a "living wage" for Phnom Penh is set at \$70 per month, legal wages in garment factories are to be raised only to \$40. Many workers are forced to work 84-105 hours per week, often for only \$25 per month. The new law mandates a 48 hour week, with no compulsory overtime, and paid annual leave. A second labour code, to cover workers in the public sector is being drafted.

Union fees are set at the equivalent of 20-40 cents per month, but very few "members" of any of the unions can afford even this. More often, workers "join" at launch rallies, where politicians and already designated union leaders distribute presents, such as radios.

In these difficult conditions, young women garment workers are leading a labour upsurge which is unprecedented in Cambodia. It is a revolt by the country's most oppressed workers against intolerable conditions, severe discipline, and extraordinarily long hours.

These young workers are increasingly frustrated at lack of change of their conditions, and are seeking new dynamic worker-leaders. Because of Cambodia's traumatic past, and present poverty, most of the militants have basic, but incomplete education. [3]

The militancy and leadership of so many young women is surprising, given the exclusion of women from political and administrative positions since the 1993 elections. [4]

One problematic aspect of the early days of this labour radicalisation has been the willingness of many ethnic Khmer workers, and Sam Rainsy, to echo traditional anti-Chinese rhetoric, while chanting slogans about workers' internationalism. Some of the new unions have excluded the super-exploited ethnic Vietnamese minority from their struggles.

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[1] The FTUWKC held a congress on 2 February, with 1,000 workers from 15 factories. On the basis of messages to this meeting, the Union claims support from ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), ILO (International Labour Organisation), AAFLI (Asia-American Free Labor Institute) and France's Force Ouvriere.

[2] The Asia-American Free Labor Institute is the asian arm of the US trade union confederation AFL-CIO. AAFLI used to be the channel for the CIA to fund anti-Communist trade unions in Asia.

[3] Schooling was only re-established in 1979-80, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge regime.

[4] Though Cambodia has the highest percentage of women workers in the world: 55% of the total workforce.