



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Cambodian garment workers organize an industry strike for higher monthly wages, 2010

September 10,
2010

to: September 16,
2010

Country: Cambodia

Location City/State/Province: *Phnom Penh*

Goals:

The garment workers were not happy with the new monthly minimum wage and went on strike to demand a 50% increase in the monthly minimum wage.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Garment Factory Workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Cambodian Labour Confederation (CFC) – led the industry strike and eventually called off the strike to discuss a possible compromise with the employers.

Ath Thun – president of CFC

Kong Athit – secretary general of CFC

Partners:

The Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU)

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Ath Thun
- CCAWDU
- CFC
- Kong Athit

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 day*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Cambodian government

Garment factories

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Not Known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign experienced incredible growth, attracting 210,000 of the 345,000 garment workers to participate in the industry strike. The strike successfully caught the attention of the Cambodian government as well as foreign investors, but as of the most recent talks between the campaigners and the government, none of their demands have been met. It should also be noted that the campaigners abandoned their original demand for an increase in the monthly minimum wage; instead, they were pushing for the creation of an attendance bonus, a seniority bonus, a food allowance, and a living wage allowance.

Although the strike did not last as long as it was meant to, the organizing union survived throughout the campaign.

The campaign was hoping to have 80,000 workers participate in the strike and instead was able to attract 210,000 workers from 95 factories to participate in the industry strike.

Between 2008 and 2010, the Cambodian economy experienced extreme hardship. In 2008, the Cambodian economy began to suffer from high inflation, which caused food prices to soar to new, expensive levels. Workers from one of Cambodia's major industries, the garment industry, were left especially distraught.

The garment industry of Cambodia drove the Cambodian economy; major international corporations like Nike, Adidas, Gap, and Walmart were all key investors in the many garment factories. Over 345,000 Cambodians worked in the hundreds of garment factories scattered around the country. In 2008, the monthly minimum wage was raised to \$50 dollars. This wage proved to be insufficient for the majority of factory workers who had to provide for themselves and their dependents.

Economic woes continued through 2009 and 2010 and the issue of monthly minimum wages continued to persist. In July of 2010, the Cambodian government reached an agreement with pro-government unions to increase the monthly minimum wage to \$61. Once again, this wage proved to be insufficient for the majority of factory workers and the lack of satisfaction with the wage provoked much unrest in the garment worker community.

On the 10th of September, Ath Thun, the president of the Cambodian Labour Federation (CFC), made public statements threatening a massive strike by garment workers if the monthly minimum wage was not increased to meet the demands of inflation. Thun demanded a 50% raise in wages, which would set the monthly minimum wage at \$93. Thun called the \$93 a "living wage" and supported his claim with official estimates from the Cambodian government's National Institute of Statistics, which stated that a monthly minimum wage of \$93 was needed for garment workers to be able to afford food, housing, and other essential expenses.

Ken Loo, the secretary general of the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia (GMAC), called Thun's call for a monthly minimum wage of \$93 "impossible" and advised factories to pursue legal action if their workers participated in the strike. Loo also told reporters that the strike was unlikely to attract 80,000 workers, which had been the target number of the campaign.

During the time leading up to the strike, the government had proposed to renegotiate the garment workers' benefit packages if the CFC would have called off the strike and its demands for a 50% wage increase. The CFC declined and chose to follow through with its threat regarding a massive strike. Consequently, after little action from the government, garment workers began striking on the 13th of September.

Most of the country's 470 garment factories were located near the country's capital, Phnom Penh. Some of the factories, such as San Lei Fung, were officially designated as "sweatshops" by various human rights organizations. On the first day of the strike, some 60,000 workers from 40 factories participated in the strike. Thun speculated that the turnout wasn't as high as the CFC had hoped because some employers were threatening to fire their workers if they went on strike.

As the campaign progressed, more and more workers participated in the strike; on the 15th of September, Kong Athit, the secretary general for the CFC, reported that over 190,000 workers from 90 factories had joined the campaign. Many strikers were members of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU), which consisted of 40,000 workers. Inspired by the level of the support that the strike had been receiving, Athit made a public statement threatening to continue the strike for over a month if employers did not act.

After pressure from the government, the CFC ended the strike on the 16th of September. Over 210,000 of the country's 350,000 garment workers had been on strike when the CFC ended the action. The government had warned the strikers that a continued stoppage would threaten worker benefits and potentially, the Cambodian economy. Thun said that the strike was called off because talks had been arranged with the employers to discuss the campaign's demands.

The end of the campaign did not mark the end of tension. Two days after the strike had concluded, five garment workers were injured in a clash with police. Workers held a rally to protest the banning of some workers from returning to work. According to Thun, the government sent police to break up the rally and some of them clashed with workers for over half an hour, leaving five workers injured. Talks between workers and employers continued after the violent incident.

On the 24th of September, several important investors in the garment industry collaborated on a letter and sent it to both the workers and the GMAC. The investors noted their awareness of the situation and expressed hope that the two sides could come to an agreement. The same day, Loo made a statement saying that he thought an agreement was possible because the workers dropped their demand for a wage increase and asked, instead, for the creation of an attendance bonus, a seniority bonus, a food allowance, and a living wage allowance for workers. Thun then echoed Loo's sentiments on the likelihood of the two sides reaching an agreement.

The most recent report from Cambodia, from mid-November, revealed that the two sides had yet to reach an agreement. Consequently, the campaign looks like it has been a failure up to that point. The strike was ended prematurely by threats from the government and the recent talks that have taken place between the two sides have excluded discussions about a monthly minimum wage increase. That demonstrates a clear abandonment by the campaign of a primary objective. It remains to be seen if the workers will be able to overcome the premature end to the campaign and achieve some level of success in the negotiations.

Research Notes

Influences:

Not Known

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

Following the conclusion of the strike, there was an incident where workers clashed with police, leaving five workers injured. On a separate note, negotiations between both parties remain ongoing as of November 2010.

M.R. Changes (09/04/2011): "Declarations of intent" added to segment 6 for the leaders' announcement that the strike would last for over a month, Survival score raised from 0.5 to 1 because the organizing union survived throughout the campaign.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Julio Alicea 28/11/2010

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