

Soy Sros, the Cambodian Garment Worker Imprisoned for Speaking Out

Wednesday 9 December 2020, by [KELLY Kim](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2020).

Soy Sros spent nearly two months in prison after criticizing her employer's response to the pandemic. She has been released, but her imprisonment has had lasting effects on her health and her workplace.



Soy Sros. Photograph: Worker Rights Consortium

On March 31, 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread like wildfire through the United States, much of the world was on lockdown in a desperate bid to halt the spread of the virus. Millions of workers were being laid off, furloughed, or, worse, required to report to work anyway—whether or not adequate safety measures were in place, and despite their own vulnerability to both the virus and economic pressure. South Asia's garment industry has been [hit particularly hard](#) as orders [dry up](#), workers become ill, and crackdowns on labor organizers proliferate. It was against this backdrop of terror and uncertainty that a young Cambodian garment worker and union leader named Soy Sros decided to log onto Facebook and call out her employer for putting her and her coworkers at risk. Soy never dreamed that using her personal social media page to speak out against injustice would become an issue—let alone land her in jail during a global pandemic.

Soy, a thirty-year-old widowed mother of two young boys, works at Superl Ltd., a garment factory in Phnom Penh that makes luxury handbags for Capri Holdings, Ltd., which owns Michael Kors, Jimmy Choo, and Versace, and Tapestry, Inc., which owns Coach and Kate Spade. These wealthy global brands [tout](#) their commitments to social responsibility and have lent vocal support to the Black Lives Matter movement. But it appears their solidarity does not extend to the South Asian workers who are paid a pittance to pump out luxury products, are compelled to return to an unsafe work environment, and, as Soy's case shows, can be harshly punished for stepping out of line.

Soy's March 31 Facebook post criticized her employer for ignoring government guidance to send workers home with reduced pay and instead firing eighty-eight workers, including a pregnant woman. Earlier that day, in her role as a shop steward for her union, the Collective Union of Movement of Workers (CUMW), Soy had gone to factory management to protest the firings, but they refused to meet with her. The next day, April 1, management demanded that Soy delete her post; she complied, but refused to sign a statement admitting her "regret" for posting "fake news." A day later, she was sitting in a jail cell, arrested on criminal charges of defamation, provocation inciting social unrest, and spreading "fake news." When reached by the *New York Times*, Michael Kors, Tapestry, and Superl all *declined* to comment.

Soy spent fifty-five days crowded into a dirty ten by twenty meter jail cell with seventy other women in the notorious Kampong Speu prison, where she told the [Guardian](#) she slept with other detainees' feet touching her head and was terrified of contracting COVID-19. She was not alone in her situation, either; there has been [an ongoing crackdown on free speech and dissent in Southeast Asia](#) as the pandemic has intensified. During the past several months, [dozens](#) of other Cambodians who have expressed fear over the virus or criticized the government and businesses' response to the pandemic have been arrested over "fake news," and only released after signing apology documents like the one Soy was offered. Cambodia's [authoritarian](#) Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has a [friendly relationship](#) with President Donald Trump, [called](#) them "terrorists."

Throughout the ordeal, Soy says she was able to count on her union for support. On June 13, the union brokered an agreement with factory management that Superl would withdraw the charges against her, reinstate her and provide back pay for the time she spent in custody, and guarantee that she will not face any retaliation or discrimination going forward. But according to Soy, they've only held up part of that bargain, and the fight continues to improve working conditions for herself and all of her fellow workers. "Even though the employer reinstated her, and she can meet with workers during the lunch break, the employer is not really fulfilling the part of establishing a faithful industrial relationship," says Pav Sina, the president of CUMW, which is an [affiliate](#) of the global IndustriALL union. "Buyers like Michael Kors should sign agreements with both unions and employers to guarantee freedom of association and improve working conditions."

For now, Soy is back at work to support her mother and her children. She was released from prison on May 27 and is still feeling the effects of her ordeal. I caught up with Soy over email with help from the [Worker Rights Consortium](#), an independent labor rights watchdog who provided translation.

Kim Kelly: What has changed for you since you were released from jail, personally as well as at work?

Soy: Since I returned, the employer is not giving any value to me at all. I am treated quite differently from the others. For example, my colleagues can freely go to get drinking water and to the toilet, but I am now strictly monitored by a fairly senior manager whenever I go to get some drinking water or go to the toilet. I feel that the surveillance has increased compared to before my arrest.

Also, in other instances, I feel treated differently. In August, as my health is not too great (sore throat and toothache), I got some treatment at the doctor at home instead of going to the hospital, and I didn't get any medical certificate. The manager—the same manager who initially filed the criminal complaint against me—wanted to give me a warning letter for that. I refused to sign it, and I told him that I would then apply for annual leave. Because the company didn't recognize that I was on sick leave, the company claimed it was unauthorized leave. I lost six dollars in attendance bonus and the wages for the day.

Saim, the manager who filed charges against me, is still monitoring my movements strictly, which frustrates me.

In my work, I connect the handles to the bag. One of my colleagues put the name of the bag upside down on around 1,000 handbags. The employer wanted to give me a warning letter for that too. I also refused.

Kelly: Were other workers in your factory or in your broader community able to speak out about this injustice while you were in prison?

Soy: According to my observation, my colleagues seem more timid now. I think they fear that if they approach me, they may risk similar treatment. Before many of my colleagues came to me with their problems, but now they seem afraid to ask me for assistance.

Kelly: I read about the terrible ordeal you underwent in prison, and how unsafe the facility is given the pandemic. How is your health now?

Soy: I feel that I have been affected by my imprisonment. When I drive around, and suddenly someone uses their horn, I get very startled. Before my imprisonment that didn't happen. The prison time was very stressful, and although I didn't feel fear while in prison I was worried about my mother and children. I also feel more ill; my heart doesn't beat like normal, and I also have inflammation in my nose, throat, and teeth

Kelly: How is your relationship with your union, the Collective Union of Movement of Workers? How did you initially get involved with the union, and how did you first become interested in fighting for workers' rights?

Soy: While I was in prison, the CUMW gave me a lot of encouragement and support. [They] told me that I shouldn't worry too much and that they were going to help [to get me out]. After I got out, CUMW has also helped me, like when I got warning letters from management. I almost feel guilty because I have had to ask them for assistance several times.

I was involved in forming the union in February 2017. I was elected leader by the first small group at the factory. We were around thirty colleagues.

My initial experience was at the small factory near Tuek Thla, when I didn't want to work overtime and I got a warning for that. I felt the factory was unreasonable, and I began to study the law and learned that overtime is voluntary. Later I left this factory to become a small vendor, but when I started on my current job, I knew a bit more about my rights.

Kelly: What do Western consumers and labor rights advocates need to know about the challenges and conditions that you and other garment workers in Cambodia and elsewhere in Asia face when you clock into work every day? How can people support your cause?

Soy: I would like to tell the consumers that they should urge the brands and employers to respect workers' rights and the unions' rights. That they shouldn't fear the unions, but instead give us respect.

Kim Kelly is a freelance journalist and organizer based in Philadelphia. Her work on labor, class, politics, and culture has appeared in the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Baffler*, and *Esquire*, among other publications, and she is the author of *FIGHT LIKE HELL*, a forthcoming book of intersectional labor history.

Soy Sros

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