

Thailand: Former Triumph workers celebrating New Year at Ministry of Labour

Monday 28 December 2009, by [PRACHATAI](#) (Date first published: 27 December 2009).

For over two months, former Triumph workers have rallied at the Ministry of Labour, despite the ministry's threats to remove them from its premises. Two of their leaders have returned from a campaign trip in Europe.

On 26 Dec, about 300 former and current Triumph workers and activists gathered at their rally site at the Ministry of Labour to hold New Year activities.

From 29 Nov to 24 Dec, Thanyathorn Khirithawornphat and Jitra Kotchadet travelled to 7 countries in Europe, including Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria. The trip was sponsored by the Clean Clothes Campaign. They met labour unions, the media, politicians and human rights activists, and told them about the layoff.

Thanyathorn said that they had faxed a letter to Triumph headquarters in Switzerland, asking to meet their executives, but the headquarters refused, saying that the letter came too late, and told them to return to Thailand for negotiations.

'In Thailand, the company has never negotiated with us. When we went to Europe, they told us to come back to negotiate in Thailand,' Thanyathorn said.

They finally presented their letter to Triumph headquarters, but the company sent representatives without decision-making power to receive it. While they were in Europe, their fellow workers also presented the letter to the company's office in Thailand, but the company told them to send the letter to Europe instead.

Thanyathorn and Jitra, joined by volunteers, staged protests against Triumph in front of its outlets in various countries, as well as at Triumph headquarters in Switzerland.

Thanyathorn said the campaign might have not yielded immediate results, but it allowed them an opportunity to tell their story to the media. They had discussions with Triumph labour unions in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria to plan further campaigns.

'They said we might not be able to stop the layoff, but the layoff should be made fair. They will give us their support,' Thanyathorn said.

Jitra said that her fellow former Triumph workers had exhausted all channels in Thailand, including the National Human Rights Commission, the Swiss Embassy, the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Labour, but their call had not been answered. Instead, they were met with experimental use by the police of a Long Range Acoustic Device for crowd dispersal. So they went on campaign in Europe.

She saw in Europe strong labour unions and parties, and said that it was necessary for workers to fight in formal politics.

Later on the same day and place, in a discussion on labour and democracy, taped for broadcast by the Nation Channel, Jitra said that since they moved their rally site to the ground floor of the Ministry of Labour building on 13 Oct, they had met the Minister twice and ministry officials several times. They were told that all legal procedures had been exhausted.

Jitra said that the company had paid compensation in accordance with the 1998 Labour Protection Act, but had not followed the 1975 Labour Relations Act, which states that the employer must inform and consult with the labour union about a layoff at least 60 days in advance, and pay compensation according to the number of years of work.

She said their demands remained the same, calling on the company to hold negotiations, to explain the real reason for the layoff, and to follow the Terms of Employment signed between the company and the workers under the 1975 Labour Relations Act. The Ministry of Labour should act as a mediator, and the government should prove its sincerity by withdrawing BOI support for the company to relocate its production base to Nakhon Sawan.

Kengkij Kittireanglab, lecturer from Kasetsart University's Faculty of Social Science, said that Abhisit Vejjajiva's talk of moving Thailand toward a welfare state was ridiculous, because one fundamental of a welfare state was employment for all, but the government had yet to solve the problems for these workers who had been here for nearly three months.

Janya Yimprasert, Director of the Thai Labour Campaign, said that the problem of layoffs remained the same. Companies abandon workers in one area in favour of workers in another where wages are relatively lower. Triumph is the last company in Thailand still running its own factories, while other companies like Nike and Adidas closed down their factories in 2002-3, and turned to subcontracted labour.

The government should give support to the workers' production of Try Arm products, she said.

P.S.

From Prachathai.

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