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# **An urgent call: “Stop the Brutal Suppression of Workers and Trade Unions in Cambodia”**

Monday 6 January 2014, by [Petition / Sign-on Letter](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2013).

**Below is a signature campaign for individual signatures posted by the Asian TNCs Monitoring Network. To sign, you can click the link and add your signature/name.**

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To:  
Prime Minister, Mr Hun Sen, Office of the Prime Minister  
Mr. Ang Vong Vathna, Minister of Justice  
Mr. Sar Kheng, Minister of Interior  
Mr. Van Souieng, President, Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia  
Mr. Kenloo, General Secretary, Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia  
Mr. Surya Prasad Subedi, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia  
Mr. Maina Kiai (copy), UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association  
Mr. Frank La Rue (copy), UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion & protection of the right to freedom of opinion & expression

## **STOP THE BRUTAL SUPPRESSION OF WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS IN CAMBODIA**

Your Excellency,

We are deeply concerned about the current situation of Cambodia. We condemn the Cambodian government for violently suppressing the legitimate strike organised and participated by the majority of garment, textile and footwear workers demanding higher minimum wage. Numerous media reports confirmed that the use of excessive force of the police and armed forces brutally killed at least four workers and severely injured 23 workers and supporters between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2014. We have been informed that many arrests were made by authorities as well and 10 workers are under police and army custody up to date. It is very unfortunate that it was the government not the workers who initiated the violent clash between security forces and strikers. Since the beginning of the general strike on 23<sup>th</sup> December 2013, workers' rallies and demonstrations have been done peacefully without such an incident. We know that violent clash began when the government tried to disallow workers to march peacefully on Veng Sreng Road on 2<sup>nd</sup> January. International and local media broadcasted that the riot police and soldiers armed with metal pipes, knives, AK47 rifles, slingshots and electric batons indiscriminately beat up union leaders, workers, supporters and passerbyers. Many were arrested with severe injuries, including Mr. Vorn Pao, President of IDEA (Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association) and Mr. Theng Savoeun, Coordinator of CCFC (Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Communities). Instead of negotiating with strikers for a peaceful solution, the authority continued to deploy heavy-handed tactics until workers began to burn tires and set up roadblocks against armed forces. In the morning of 3<sup>rd</sup> January, armed forces

finally started shooting live ammunition directly to workers, killing four workers and severely wounding many.

We wonder why the government perpetrated such degree of violence to silent a legitimate demand for a minimum wage increase. Workers are not an enemy of the government but citizens who desperately need government's support to address their grievances. The current legal minimum wage of \$75/\$80 per month for probationary and non-probationary workers in the garment industry is barely up to the subsistence level. That is the reason why even government-led study by the Labor Advisory Committee Survey Working Group recommended a minimum wage between \$157-\$177. Garment workers have been the backbone of the fast economic growth in Cambodia for the last decade. Roughly 80% of export from Cambodia relies upon 350,000 garment workers while about 20 % of the Cambodian population live on their earning. Despite their tremendous contribution, they still account for a large part of Cambodia's working poor. Wage increase has been lagging far behind inflation and productivity increase since the launch of the industry in Cambodia. On top of it, workers have been subjected to increasing job insecurity as an increasing number of employers utilise fixed term contract of around three months in order to decrease labour cost. Little income meant workers had to work longer to make the sufficient income. Consequence was endemic mass fainting in those factories - over 4,000 workers have fainted at work over the past two years.

There have been numerous attempts to improve these conditions by garment unions. However, employers and the Royal Cambodian Government have been reluctant to make concessions. This is the reason why so many garment workers are hitting the street in peaceful rallies, demanding a reasonable minimum wage increase. In December 2013, the government announced its plan to increase minimum wage to \$95 (later increased to \$100), ignoring the recommendation made by Working Group and unions' demand for \$165 minimum wage. Almost all garment, footwear and textile workers' union federations, including Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C.CAWDU), National Independent Federation Textile Union of Cambodia (NIFTUC), the Collective Union of Movement of Workers (CUMW), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Union (CATU), Free Trade Union of Workers of Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC), Worker Friendship Union Federation (WFUF), and Independent Youth Union Confederation (IDYTU) declared strike in protest to the plan. Together, the federations comprise 386 plant-level unions and represent 249,700 workers in in the textile, garment and footwear industries. As of 26 December, 127 factories were on strike.

The active participation of workers and unity among unions shows the magnitude of the problem. Nonetheless, the government showed its determination to defend only the interest of employers and transnational retail giants whose booming businesses were possible only at the expense of Cambodian garment workers. Manufacturers in Cambodia managed to survive heated international competition and continued to grow even after the global quota system favouring Cambodia was lifted. On the other hand, global retail giants are able to make huge profit by squeezing workers. The Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia (GMAC), the local representing body of both foreign and domestic garment manufacturers, has been the least productive negotiator in the national bargaining for minimum wage, constantly lobbying for low wages. Global giants benefiting from Cambodian garment workers include some of the world's most profitable corporations such as H&M, The GAP and Levis & Co whose global revenue reached \$18.13 billion, \$15.7 billion and \$4.61 billion in 2012 respectively. In face of increasing international criticism and workers' protests, they are busy at blaming each other for low wages and bad working conditions in Cambodia, instead of sitting together with workers to find a way of doing business without sacrificing decent labour.

It is outrageous that the Cambodian government sides with a small number of investors and industrialists who have shown almost no interest in the welfare of Cambodian citizens, rather than listen carefully to the voice of its own people who shoulder the economic development of country.

Cambodian workers have their constitutional right to strike and freedom of association. As a signatory to the ILO's Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association, the Cambodian government also has obligation to uphold the principle of minimum interference in a peaceful strike. Cambodian workers also must enjoy fundamental human right for decent living. Article 104 of the Cambodian Labour Law clearly states that 'wage must be at least equal to the guaranteed minimum wage; that is, it must ensure every worker of a decent standard of living compatible with human dignity'. Everyone living in Cambodia is well aware that the government's proposal of \$100 per month is in no ways enough to guarantee such standard of living assured by the law.

We urge the Government of Cambodia to immediately stop brutally suppressing workers and union leaders and refrain from deploying violent measures against its own citizens. The employers must find ways of doing business without squeezing workers to death. Indeed, a peaceful resolution of mounting tension and unrest must begin with immediate release of the arrested workers and union leaders as well as a thorough independent investigation of the violence that killed workers who had just wanted a better life and have courage to protest injustice.

Sincerely,  
[Your name]

*To sign:*

<http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/mr-hun-sen-stop-the-brutal-suppression-of-workers-and-trade-unions-in-cambodia-3>

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