

Ayuba Wabba

President
Président
Präsident
Presidente

H.E. Hun Sen

Prime Minister
Royal Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia

Sharan Burrow

General Secretary
Secrétaire générale
Generalsekretärin
Secretaria General

HTUR/MW

3 August 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and ITUC Asia-Pacific (ITUC-AP) condemn the arrest of Rong Chhun, president of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions (CCU) and ITUC affiliate in Cambodia. Rong Chhun is the ex-president of the Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association (CITA), the current chair of the ITUC Cambodian Council and one of the most outspoken unionists in Cambodia. We were informed that Rong Chhun was taken away by police from his home in late evening of 31 July for allegedly inciting to commit felony. He is under detention at Prey Sor prison pending a trial.

We notice with great concern that Rong Chhun's arrest took place against the background of his recent trade union activities and criticisms on the impact of the government's policies under the economic downturn brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rong Chhun was demanding the government for the release of four members of CITA namely, Peat Mab, Sun Thun, Chhum Chan and Keo Thay who were arrested and detained by the authorities for making comments on public health issues or holding online classes for students during school closures between March and June. On 1 July, Rong Chhun wrote to the Cambodian Prime Minister urging the government to respond proactively to the allegations of the European Union and to make improvements on human rights and democracy before the Everything But Arms trade preference is due to be withdrawn on 12 August.

In the recent labour dispute over the closure of Violet Apparel, Rong Chhun picketed with hundreds of terminated workers and Yang Sophorn, president of Cambodian Alliance of Trade Union affiliated to CCU. CATU and CCU are supporting workers to claim their legal entitlements in defiance of the government's threat to dissolve the federation.

On 21 July, Rong Chhun spoke to the media about the loss of livelihood of the farmers and their land to the Vietnamese border in Ponhea Kraek district of Tbong Khmum after he made a field visit to the community. He was accused by the Cambodia Border Committee of spreading fake news about the border conflicts on 31 July and arrested by the police under article 495 of the Criminal Code. In conjunction with article 494, the provision punishes incitement by speech or writing 'to disturb social security' regardless whether disturbance has been objectively caused. The extremely vague and overbroad provisions have been heavily criticized for allowing arbitrary and politically motivated prosecution and sentencing.

We are deeply worried about the alarming trend of repression in Cambodia. As pointed out in the recent report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, the government of Cambodia is increasingly reliant on cyber control and surveillance over freedom of speech and opinions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Netizens, civil society and trade union activists are subjected to un-substantiated allegations, arbitrary arrest and criminalisations for challenging government policies and employers' practices. Transparency and legal due diligence are not guaranteed and disproportionate penalties are imposed in a bid to silence dissent and quell labour conflicts.

The CCU and trade unions in Cambodia have legitimate concerns over the impact of the government's policies and trade union participation is key to economic resilience. Their freedom to speak up and represent the interests of the working people, as well as the right not to be penalized for the opinions they expressed is indispensable to the free exercise of freedom of association. The Cambodian government has obligations to protect and uphold these rights under the ILO Convention No.87 and international human rights treaties.

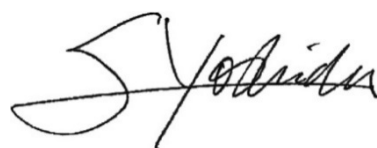
Rong Chhun as well as the trade unionists detained and sentenced for exercising their right to free expression must be released. The ITUC and ITUC-AP urge the government of Cambodia to immediately drop all the charges against Rong Chhun and the detained trade unionists, and to commit to respect fundamental rights and freedoms under the international human rights treaties.

We stay in support to Rong Chhun and the CCU in exercising their legitimate trade union rights and we are monitoring closely the human rights situation in Cambodia.

Yours sincerely,



Sharan Burrow
General Secretary ITUC



Shoya Yoshida
General Secretary ITUC-AP