

## The Absence of Sanctuary

The CPP realised that they had lost support of many people in the country, especially garment factory workers whose passion and numbers were powering the CNRP surge. The minimum wage for factory workers had remained stagnant at \$66 per month for nearly three years until it increased to \$80 per month just two months before the 2013 election. During that period workers had become increasingly disgruntled and the number of strikes across Cambodia nearly quadrupled in 2012 compared to 2011<sup>1</sup>, becoming even more frequent in 2013<sup>2</sup>. Workers did not believe \$80 per month was a fair amount for their contribution to multi-billion-dollar revenues, which had grown by a quarter in 2013 alone<sup>3</sup>. A week after the election, the government announced that they would review the minimum wage again<sup>4</sup>.

Government plans to quell discontent were upended when an owner of the SL Garment Processing factory, one of Asia's biggest, paid military police to guard workers inside the factory, hoping to suppress union activity. In a combative mood following the election, 4000

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1 Arnold, D. (2013, November). Better Work or 'Ethical Fix'? Lessons from Cambodia's Apparel Industry. Global Labour Column. Retrieved from <http://column.global-labour-university.org/>

2 Why Cambodian garment workers are striking more this year than any in the past decade (2013, September 6). Quartz. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/>

3 Aun, P (2013, November 26). Government to Meet Over January Minimum Wage Increase. The Cambodia Daily. Retrieved from <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/>

4 Minimum Wage Determination in Cambodia (2013, November 1). The Arbitration Council. Retrieved from <https://www.arbitrationcouncil.org/>

workers immediately went on strike to protest against intimidation<sup>5</sup> and were quickly joined by another 1000 workers from a sister factory<sup>6</sup>.

The trade union had a list of eight demands including a \$150 minimum monthly wage, which is what the CNRP had promised if they won the election<sup>7</sup>. Largely ignoring the demands, factory owners dismissed 700 workers, which caused another strike and protest, prompting the government to intervene and force the factory to re-hire the workers<sup>8</sup>.

Unions were not satisfied however, and workers continued to demand \$150 per month and improved working conditions to counter reports of severe malnourishment among workers<sup>9</sup>, stifling heat inside factories and poor access to clean water<sup>10</sup>. The strikes continued and, in November 2013, approximately 1000 workers marched from their factory on Veng Sreng Street towards Hun Sen’s house eight kilometres away, hoping to submit a petition asking for his intervention.

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5 Teehan, S. (2013, November 19). Cambodian workers battling for their rights. Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/>

6 Mom, K. (2013, August 20). Strike grows as another factory walks. The Phnom Penh Post. Retrieved from <https://phnompenhpost.com/>

7 Arnold, D. (2013, November). Better Work or ‘Ethical Fix’? Lessons from Cambodia’s Apparel Industry. Global Labour Column. Retrieved from <http://column.global-labour-university.org/>

8 Cambodia Garment Workers in Mass Protest Over ‘Unfair’ Dismissals (2013, September 5). The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/>

9 Teehan, S. (2013, November 19). Cambodian workers battling for their rights. Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/>

10 Why Cambodian garment workers are striking more this year than any in the past decade (2013, September 6). Quartz. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/>

After one kilometre, the workers were met by a wall of sixty riot policemen blocking the road on Stung Meanchey bridge. Standing toe-to-toe, a union leader jostled with the riot police and called on everybody to keep pressing on “for our collective benefit, for our rights, for justice” and called on marchers to “Go! Go! Go!” Scuffles broke out and as the police retreated, workers threw small rocks and bricks picked up from the side of the road. Police blasted water cannons, but workers continued to fling stones, slipping as they did, and the police were forced back from the bridge, abandoning a police truck<sup>11</sup>.

The distinctive lines of police and workers had become a swirl of bodies chasing and fighting each other, and the riot spilled over into Stung Meanchey pagoda, directly opposite the primary school where the riot on Election Day flared up just four months earlier. In a city where some people do not have homes and parks are rare, pagodas become a refuge where people can sit and be, cooling under the shade of trees.

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11 Other references used for this section: Calamur, K. (2013, November 12). Clash Between Garment Workers, Police In Cambodia Turns Deadly. National Public Radio. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/>; Mom, K. (2013, December 4). Jubilation as SL strike ends. The Phnom Penh Post. Retrieved from <https://phnompenhpost.com/>; Euronews (2013, November 12). Cambodia protests: Garment factory workers hijack a police car, clash with riot cops (video). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgIZhbFEXGo>; One Dead, Seven Injured Amid Violent Clashes in SL Garment Workers Strike (2013, November 12). Community Legal Education Centre. Retrieved from <http://www.clec.org.kh/default.php>; Yun, S. (2013, December 11). Woman Shot Dead by Cambodian Police in Protest Clampdown. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.rfa.org/english/>; Mom, K. & Teehan, S. (2013, November 4). Strikers, police clash. The Phnom Penh Post. Retrieved from <https://phnompenhpost.com/>; Mech, D. (2013, November 13). Woman Killed as Police Open Fire During Garment Worker Clash. The Cambodia Daily. Retrieved from <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/>

Such serenity was ripped asunder during the protest when up to six police officers entered the pagoda chasing down and beating protestors. With more protestors entering the pagoda, the police officers realised they were heavily outnumbered and dashed for a hiding place, huddling in a small locked room. Monks initially prevented enraged protestors from entering but the protestors barged through the door.

Soeng Sen Karuna has been working for Cambodian human rights organisations since 2004, but his interest in human rights began much earlier as a young man in 1993 when UNTAC held a two-week training course. His certificate from that course is still treasured at home and Karuna says the lessons he learned about civil rights still guide him today. Jovial and portly, Karuna seems to value human life for the enjoyment it can bring as much as any philosophical treatise on individual liberty. It is a wonder, that he shares when retelling his stories, that such a genial man can so often find himself caught in a situation of violence. Again.

Managing to force himself into the small room, Karuna persuaded protestors to leave the policemen unharmed and take their shields, batons and body armour only<sup>12</sup>. Protestors, now joined by local onlookers sympathetic to their plight, turned their attention to the captured truck, which they tipped over with triumphant cries. It was not

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<sup>12</sup> Soeng Sen Karuna, Author's interview No. 219

long before the truck was ablaze along with two police motorbikes grabbed in the chaos.

Within an hour, more than 100 policemen armed with AK47s and handguns gathered and Karuna could see them storming the pagoda, bullets whizzing past his ears and tear gas choking him. Protestors ducked, ran, or hid while others tried to fight bullets with stones, iron bars and wooden sticks. Karuna, coughing and spluttering, tore a piece of orange cloth from a monk's robe to cover his face.

Police were going from building to building, searching rooms and grabbing who they could. As police entered the building he was in, Karuna was huddled next to a 20-year-old student who had inadvertently walked into the riot on his way to university. Without provocation, police shot Houen Chan in his torso injuring his spinal cord causing him to be paralysed from the waist down. Karuna escaped, stumbling over a fallen Buddha statue as he ran out the building.

A second man was shot inside the pagoda, while outside on the side of the street, Eng Sokhum and her daughter were kneeling behind her food cart when a bullet pierced Sokhum's chest. Her husband and sons took her to hospital in a tuk-tuk but she died before they could get there. Blood remained splattered on the daughter's clothes when she told

journalists that “there is no use filing a complaint with the police ... [they even] threatened me and accused me of being a demonstrator.”<sup>13</sup>

Hundreds of military police overwhelmed workers, arresting those who had not fled already. A total of eight people were shot that morning, one killed, and some protestors were beaten so badly that blood stained the walls of Stung Meanchey pagoda and Veng Sreng Street. Policemen were also injured and two fire trucks, which had been used for their water cannons, were damaged. In Cambodia, it is improper to touch a monk, but such sanctity was absent that day as five monks who had been involved in the protest were injured from kicks and punches. Seven monks were arrested and at least one was kicked and slapped as he was marched to the police van.

The Government sought to facilitate a compromise, knowing that the CRNP would use worker discontent to further its own aims of a re-election. The strike ended on 3<sup>rd</sup> December when the parties agreed to drop all legal challenges, return to previous work schedules and ban the factory owner who brought in the military police from having contact with workers<sup>14</sup>. The issue of the minimum wage was deferred until the

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<sup>13</sup> Yun, S. (2013, December 11). Woman Shot Dead by Cambodian Police in Protest Clampdown. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.rfa.org/english/>

<sup>14</sup> Mom, K. (2013, December 4). Jubilation as SL strike ends. *The Phnom Penh Post*. Retrieved from <https://phnompenhpost.com/>

*The Absence of Sanctuary*, a lost chapter by Gordon Conochie from:  
*A Tiger Rules the Mountain – Cambodia's Pursuit of Democracy*

Labor Advisory Committee would give their recommendation later that month.

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