



NagaWorld casino workers petition government for financial help

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Employees of NagaWorld casino present their petition outside the Labor Ministry on June 16 appealing for stimulus payments as entertainment facilities remain closed in Cambodia amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Panha Chhorpoan



More than 200 NagaWorld employees submitted a petition at the Ministry of Labor to request a stimulus payment of \$40 per month as entertainment venues remain closed in a bid to contain the spread of Covid-19.



Chhim Sithar, 32, president of NagaWorld's Khmer Employees' Labor Rights Support Union said outside the ministry that she and other employees of the casino's gaming department brought their petition to the ministry because they have not been given the \$40 monthly allotment provided to workers in other sectors hit hard by Covid-19.

"We told His Excellency who represents the Labor Ministry that workers in the gaming department of NagaWorld have not received a \$40 of budget of support from the government," Sithar said. She added that NagaWorld had only paid workers 50 percent of their wages in April and May, and had notified employees it would stop paying them from June onward.

"I hope that our petition will be considered by the government," she said, also asking why the government had not allowed NagaWorld to reopen while factories and offices had been allowed to do so.

Casinos were among the venues included in the government's March 17 decision to close entertainment and nightlife facilities in Cambodia amid the Covid-19 outbreak.

Sithar said that in addition to daily living costs, many NagaWorld employees were also burdened by debts to banks and microfinance institutions (MFIs).

"Most NagaWorld staff still need to pay their bank or microfinance lender, so they have had to spend all their money since they were suspended," Sithar said. "If two to three months in the future the company is still not paying us and we have no supporting mechanism from the government...we will face a major crisis."

She said that 90 percent of NagaWorld's nearly 9,000 employees had taken out loans, and that she was considering making an appeal to banks and MFIs to suspend repayments.

Ry Sovandy, 38, a Nagaworld employee and union activist who has worked at the casino and resort for 13 years, said she was facing huge financial distress and could not afford her \$600 monthly loan repayments.

"I owe a microfinance lender \$50,500 that I borrowed about a year ago to buy a house," she said. "After my work was suspended in March, I asked the [MFI] to delay my payments for six months because I hope that in six months, Covid-19 will ease and I can go back to work."

Nin Vannak, a deputy secretary-general of the Committee for the Resolution of Strikes at the Labour Ministry, said that the ministry had received the petition from NagaWorld's union

"I sent the petition to the Labor Minister already but we need to wait for the result," Vannak said, adding that he could not predict how long it would take to reach a decision.

However, a similar petition for monthly financial support delivered to the Labor Ministry on June 10 by a group of entertainment industry workers was turned down earlier this week. Backed by the Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation union, the workers had asked the Labor Ministry for \$40 in monthly financial assistance while KTVs and nightclubs remain closed.

Ou Tepphallin, president of CFSWF, said that the ministry had sent a letter on June 15 declining to provide a subsidy, saying the government had already finalized its budget package.

"The Ministry's response shows that they do not really want to respond to the entertainment workers' request," Tepphallin said, adding that the letter had instead suggested that workers seek job opportunities through a new service offered by the ministry.

"If [the workers] had the ability to solve this by themselves, they would not be requesting assistance from the government," she said.

She pointed out that the government had provided a budget to the garment and tourism sectors, but had abandoned entertainment service workers.

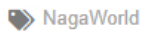
“We still urge the government to consider our request again,” Tepphallin said.

Vannak said the ministry had already responded to the entertainment industry workers and referred the reporter to the ministry’s website, declining to comment further.

According to the Labor Ministry’s statement regarding the latest Covid-19 support budget , informal economy workers, employees of factories or businesses that have shut down, migrant workers and disadvantaged households are covered in the current \$100 million social support budget.

“The royal government is now considering a social support scheme in the form of providing cash to households that have been adversely affected by covid-19, aiming to ease their daily financial strains during the crisis,” the statement said.

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