

**INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY**  
**“WORKERS UNITES TO FIGHT**  
**Corporate EXPLOITAION”**  
**MAY 01, 2005**

**Introduction**

May 1<sup>st</sup> marks the day when workers successfully claimed their rights to 8 hours a day work, 48 hours a week. A lot of women workers sacrificed their lives, time, blood and sweat in the struggle to obtain equal rights for women the same as for men. Women, and men, regardless of their nationality, race, skin colour, religion or culture throughout the world celebrate this international women’s day and send out a message to all people that they are struggling for equality, non-discrimination, justice and peace.

The Womyn’s Agenda for Change-WAC together with some country garment workers celebrated International Labour Day under the banner “**Workers Unites to Fight Corporate Exploitation**”. Regardless of employers’ tactics to stop workers from joining May Day, more than 1,000 workers from around fifty factories in different areas in Phnom Penh joint the day. Direct and indirect sex workers, lesbians group, MSM, Srey Sras who are members of the Women’s Network for Unity-WNU, a national sex workers collective network as workers, also join in this solidarity and important event to demand their rights as workers. Representatives from NGOs and media people in the country came to witness this event too.



The day started with a group of workers sang a solidarity song, **“Bread and Roses”**. The song is an international movement song of workers’ struggle to demand the living wage and decent life from their employers, *“ Yes it’s bread we fight for but we fight for roses too.”* The song was followed by a traditional dance “Kous Tror Lork” (hitting the coconut shell) performed by Srey Sras Group from WNU.

“Working people throughout the world are struggling to fight for workers rights, said a worker who briefly commentated about the history of May Day. “On 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1886 there was riot in the United States of America to claim for eight hour work per day. This campaign was not successful yet immediately but over 340,000 men and women workers were dismissed from jobs and some were killed by polices. However, the riot still continued in many countries and finally, they succeeded.

Afterward, Women’s Network for Unity group sang a song, **“Rights and Labour”** and followed by a role play titled **“Narrow Choice.”** The role play illustrated the situation of sex workers working in red lights districts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It shows the experiences of sex workers in their day-to-day realities such as living hand-to-mouth, chronic debt, gender based-violence and discrimination and privatization of health services. Confronting with poverty, particular the feminization of poverty, sex workers understand that women’s access to resources in decreasing as are options for sustained livelihood. The story shown how debt and landlessness, lack of education, gender discrimination, domestic violence and trafficking of women and children all contribute to the situation that sex workers find themselves in today.



A documentary, “Behind the Labels” was displayed to all participants. It describes the miserable situation of workers from different countries like China and Philippines in one island in United States where the boss forced them to work all days and nights without relaxation when corporation set a dead line to collect the products. They worked 48 hours per 2 days. They can not claim or protest against the owner of the factory because before they started working there, they made a contract with the owner that they cannot claim or demand anything. They had to give money to the owner before they can work there, so they worked many years to pay back to the owner and they had nothing left for themselves and their families. Their lives in the factory are the same as in the prison because they cannot go out side; they had to work and stayed in the factory everyday.

A role play of women garment workers reflected the conditions of workers after the MFA period was performed. It demonstrated the difficulties faced by workers because they have to work harder and harder in order to fit with the demand of high productivity but cheap labour. The production is declined in price leaving workers unable to earn the living wage as they have to spend on every single unit of expenses, their rent, utilities, food, medicines and send home. Forced overtime is taking place or they risk being dismissed. Some factories suspended they work while other closed down paying no compensation to their employees. Workers are calling to stop the exploitation of workers!

*“Before the quota finished, I had to finish 300 pieces per 8 hours and worked only on one machine. But now I am assigned 550-600 pieces to finish in 8 hours work and operate two machines. But my wage is calculated on the basis on 275 or 300 pieces only. They said I have to accept this,”* a worker from one factory in Phnom Penh that is producing for Old Navy brand.

After the role play, a worker in a factory in Bak Kheng area explained to her friends and sisters what caused their suffering was not only the owner of the factory but it was mainly the famous brands that belongs to giant corporation that led their lives in the factory in miserable conditions. Some workers received low wage and others were suspended and dismissed from jobs because workers cannot fulfill the corporations’ needs and greed. She also explained the feeling of factory workers who are away from home, away from the farm work and live alone in the city to earn money to support her family.

Finally, many workers went on the stage to sing together and damaged 3 straw puppets which represented the exploitative corporations.

The activities of the day were interluded by many songs composed by the workers to express about their conditions, concerns and demand for better lives. The newly composed songs described about how privatization of basic services such as health care and education affect to lives of workers and citizens in the country.

## **Conclusion**

- Although management used different tactics such as preparing party or asked workers to work on May Day, many workers still came to join the May Day celebration at WAC much more than expected number. This shown their concern and commitment to change the situation they are facing.
- Government continues to ban public gathering and marching so workers used the space at WAC office to voice out their problems and call for changes. Many of their concerns were expressed through their songs.
- Again though May Day gathering, grass-roots women, especially sex workers and garment workers, were given chances to have a space where they can share their problems and fight against corporate exploitation and demand their rights.
- Workers were interviewed by a few radio and TV stations about the event.

### **Worker's impression**

A worker from a factory in Teouk Tla said that she came to join this occasion because she wanted to speak out her concerns about the bad working conditions in the factory. She said that after many factories closed because the Quota was finished, many workers were unemployed. They cannot earn their living because they did not go to school, so they have no choice to earn money for themselves and their families. Even though some factories are still open, working conditions are very bad because workers are forced to work overtime work with low and insufficient wage. The reason factory owners force workers to work many hours without relaxing is because of the big corporation. She suggests the government should take care of workers who are exploited by the corporation and put pressure on investors as well as corporations to respect the labour law and working conditions. Last but not least, she would like to call all workers to stand up to demand their rights for better working conditions.



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