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New Study Critical of ILO's Cambodian Program

By KRISTI ELLIS

WASHINGTON — The International Labor Organization needs to take several steps to improve its monitoring of the apparel industry in Cambodia, including making its findings more transparent and involving workers in the dialogue over factory conditions and their rights, according to a new report critical of the ILO program there.

The 160-page study released by Stanford University Law School's International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic and the Worker Rights Consortium analyzed ILO's Better Factories Cambodia program and concluded that it is "undereffective."

In the report, "Monitoring in the Dark," researchers found that wages and "basic job security" have declined in the Cambodian garment industry over the past 11 years, despite the presence of the ILO's program that has as its mission to assess and report on working conditions in the garment industry and help factories improve them.

BFC, created in 2001 as a result of the U.S.-Cambodia Textile & Apparel Trade Agreement to create incentives to improve labor rights, is managed by the ILO and works with the Cambodian government, the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia, labor unions and international buyers to enhance conditions in the sector.

According to the new study, BFC covers over 300 factories — 120 more than when it started in 2001. More than 400,000 people worked in the garment factories at peak periods and the industry accounts for 85 percent of Cambodia's total exports, and 95 percent of the total if footwear is included.

"Our research suggests...that during the 11 years of BFC's operations in Cambodia, wages and basic job security have actually declined for Cambodian garment workers, and that other goals of the labor movement, particularly attempts to foster genuine collective bargaining between employers and workers, and to ensure basic elements of occupational safety and health, continue to be elusive," the report said.

The report found that wages for Cambodian garment workers have declined 17 percent, violations of freedom of association persist, there is a lack of "authentic" collective bargaining, unmonitored subcontracting exists, the use of child labor is still present and health and safety violations persist.

The study was also critical of the scope of the BFC program, charging that factory monitoring reports are kept confidential to factory owners and brands, a worker complaint system does not exist for labor abuses and little pressure is put on brands to take any action to correct violations in factories.

“The [ILO] program was supposed to reduce what was called ‘auditor or compliance fatigue’ on the part of factories,” said Ben Hensler, general counsel at the WRC. “Brands were encouraged to and, in many cases have, stopped doing their own monitoring in Cambodia and handed it over to the BFC. What that has meant is that many brands do not have anybody on the ground to inspect factories....The link between identifying violations, which the BFC covers, and having a violation remediated, which is the responsibility of brands, has been broken.”

A request to the ILO for comment on the report was not returned.

The three central recommendations of the study are that the BFC should commit to transparency and issue public reports where there are problems and identify individual factories, it should interview garment workers and unions outside of the workplace and respond directly to complaints of abuse, and it should expand its role in remediation and require buyers and factories to submit remediation plans jointly to the BFC to achieve compliance with Cambodian labor laws and global standards.

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