

Support the workers that keep Cambodian culture alive

Built atop a raised plain which become an islet during rainy season, the West Mebon temple complex dates back to the 11th Century Khmer civilisation, built during the reigns of King Suryavarman I and Udayadityavarman II. West Mebon is noted for its elegant ornamentation, and such delicate restoration work required the assembly of a team of expert restoration workers with experience dating back as far as the 1960s.

The team of 126 began their work in September 2012, funded by a US\$3.8 million donation from the French Embassy in partnership with the Cambodian Authority for the Protection of the Site and the Management of the Region of Angkor (APSARA). The workers were employed by the French École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), which has been in charge of archeological work in the Angkor region since 1907.

In 2013 they formed a union affiliated to the Building and Wood Workers Trade Union of Cambodia (BWTUC) and bargained a collective agreement with EFEO that brought them real improvements.

Restoration work stops

In February 2018 they were informed that due to financial difficulties work on the temple restoration would be suspended, and that control of the project has been transferred to the Cambodian agency APSARA.

The shut-down, which began in May, was originally slated to last only three months, but their employer is refusing to let them return to work on the terms and conditions in the collective agreement that they fought for and won. On numerous occasions they have tried to talk to APSARA and the French Embassy, however each time their attempts have been rebuffed. Work is now around 65% completed, and it is estimated that there is around five years remaining work before the job has been completed.

APSARA's record on recognizing the right to freedom of association is poor. In 2008 the BWI filed a [complaint](#) to the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association on behalf of one BWTUC's predecessor unions, alleging intimidation of workers for joining the union along with other labour law violations. They failed to respond to the union's request for discussion and negotiation and told workers that if they want to continue working they must disaffiliate from the union and resubmit their employment applications, terminating 14 workers. In 2013 APSARA was again in the thick of labour conflict, when 170 workers at the Ta Phrom were [locked out](#) after threatening to strike over planned job cuts.

We must make sure that this situation is not replicated in West Mebon. The political situation in Cambodia right now is very fragile, however this reason should not be used to deny workers their fundamental rights to organise.

Why join a union?

Organised workers that bargain a collective agreement get a better deal on the job. APSARA's aim is to wipe out the benefits won in their collective agreement. The wages being offered by APSARA are around 30-65% lower than the agreement rates. The agreement rate also included an annual increase in line with the rate of inflation, additional leave and a \$25 holiday payment twice a year.

West Mebun temple workers restoration workers say: "No work without our collective agreement."