

# SPOTLIGHT ON 10 HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The 10 human rights defenders (HRDs) whose profiles are outlined below are leaders and members of the Labour Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld (LRSU). The unionists are all former employees of NagaWorld, a highly profitable, Malaysian-owned casino with an exclusive operating license in Phnom Penh. These men and women are currently imprisoned in Correctional Center 2 (CC2) and Phnom Penh's PJ prison.

Read their stories below.



LRSU strike on 24 December, 2021

# Chhim Sithar

Ms. Chhim Sithar, 34, comes from a large family. She is the second child of six siblings and has four brothers and one sister, and prior to her arrest she helped support her 57-year-old uncle who has leukemia, her 65-year-old mother and her 33-year-old brother. She graduated with a Bachelor's Degree majoring in Economic Informatics.

Sithar has worked at NagaWorld since 2007 and became the president of LRSU in 2010. In 2013, she was sued by NagaWorld for illegal striking; the company filed and claimed for 1 million USD from her, a complaint which is still pending today. In the same year, she was also arrested and questioned for her union affiliations. In September 2019, she was suspended with pay by NagaWorld while campaigning for a living wage for thousands of workers, and later reinstated as a result of lobbying by striking workers. She was later fired in April 2020 alongside the entire local union leadership.

Sithar was charged on 3 January 2022 and was violently arrested the next day as she attempted to join her fellow union members at an ongoing strike site.



Chhim Sithar (left), her mother (middle) and sister (right)

# Chhim Sokhorn

Ms. Chhim Sokhorn, 40, helps support her 66-year-old father, who has diabetes, and her 68-year-old mother, who works as a security guard in Siem Reap province. She has dedicated the last 19 years to working at NagaWorld and helping organise within LRSU, where she serves as the union's secretary. She wants to protect all employees at NagaWorld. Sokhorn was arrested on 31 December 2021 at the union's offices. Whilst in detention, she is missing her friends, family and work very much.



Chhim Sokhorn (right) and her sister (left)

# Kleang Soben


Ms. Kleang Soben, 41, was recently married in January 2021 and spent her first wedding anniversary in prison. Soben helps support her three family members, including her mother, her husband, and younger brother. She has worked with NagaWorld since 2003 and she joined LRSU when she first started working at the casino. She now serves as a workers' representative with the union. She was arrested on 31 December 2021 at the LRSU offices. She misses her family and friends very much.



Kleang Soben and her husband

# Sun Sreypich

Ms. Sun Sreypich, 31, is a single mother who supports her 11-year-old son, studying in grade 6, as well as her 66-year-old mother who helps take care of Sreypich's son. She is divorced and recently got newly engaged. Sreypich is a workers' representative with LRSU and was arrested on 31 December 2021 at the LRSU offices.

A photograph of two women standing side-by-side at what appears to be a formal event or wedding. The woman on the left is older, with short dark hair, wearing a light pink top with a decorative, colorful geometric pattern around the neckline and hem. The woman on the right is younger, with long dark hair, wearing a blue and white floral dress. They are standing on a red carpet. In the background, there are tables with white tablecloths, a man in a light blue shirt, and floral decorations.

Sun Sreypich and her mother

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# Hay Sopheap

Ms. Hay Sopheap, 35, is a single mother and widow who supports three family members, including her 68-year-old mother, who has a chronic disease, her 11-year-old daughter, who is studying in Grade 7 and her 21-year-old brother, who is in his third year of university. Sopheap has worked with NagaWorld since 2006. A year after starting her job, she joined LRSU in order to help address the injustices she saw at her workplace, and now serves as a workers' representative. She was arrested on 31 December 2021 at the LRSU offices. At the time of her arrest, she was still employed by NagaWorld, however she joined the strike to find justice for fellow employees. During her time in detention, she is stitching and creating bags. She misses her family very much.



Hay Sopheap and her mother

# Ry Sovandy

Ms. Ry Sovandy, 40, lives with her husband, who is a tuk tuk driver. She is the main financial supporter of her 60 year-old mother and 65-year old father, who live in Kandal province near Phnom Penh. Sovandy is the oldest of four children. She has three siblings, including her two younger brothers who sell vegetables and her younger sister who works in a private company. She is a workers' representative with LRSU and was arrested on 31 December 2021 at the LRSU offices.



Ry Sovandy and her mother

## Touch Sereymeas

Ms. Touch Sereymeas, 29, has a small family, including her partner, her brother and her older sister who works in a casino in Preah Sihanouk province. She is an LRSU member and was arrested on 31 December 2021 as she was leaving the strike site in front of NagaWorld. Sereymeas was still employed by NagaWorld at the time of her arrest and was at the strike to show solidarity with her friends and colleagues.



Touch Sereymeas (right) and her partner (left)



# Choub Channath

Mr. Choub Channath, 44, is engaged and his family includes his fiancé, 96-year-old father, two sisters and seven brothers. His fiancé continues to work at NagaWorld and they used to live together in Phnom Penh. Channath was fired from NagaWorld during the mass layoffs in April 2021, after having worked there for around 10 years. He suspects he was fired for being an active member of LRSU. He is a member of LRSU and was arrested on 5 February 2022 as he was leaving a COVID-19 testing site in a tuk tuk. Earlier that day, the government ordered LRSU strikers into buses to go to the testing center and take multiple COVID-19 tests. Channath had complied with the order and tested negative prior to his arrest.



Choub Channath and his father

# Seng Vannarith


Mr. Seng Vannarith, 45, is married with two children, a 13-year-old son studying in grade 7 and a 10-year-old daughter studying in grade 4. He started working for NagaWorld in 1997 and dedicated 25 years of his life to NagaWorld, reaching the position of pit boss by the time he was fired in April 2021. Vannarith is a member of LRSU and was arrested on 5 February 2022 as he was leaving a COVID-19 testing site in a tuk tuk. Vannarith's wife also worked for NagaWorld and was fired at the same time as him in April 2021, during the mass layoffs by NagaWorld. Whilst they were not given concrete reasons as to why they were fired, they suspect that their names were included on the list of mass layoffs due to being active members of LRSU and to Vannarith's influential position as Assistant Manager in NagaWorld. Both Vannarith and his wife joined the LRSU strike on 18 December 2021 and continued to strike until they were both arrested nearly two months later. His wife was released the next day on 6 February 2022.



Seng Vannarith and his wife

# Sao Sambath

Mr. Sao Sambath, 31, is married and has two young daughters, aged 2 and 4 years old. Sambath's wife also worked for NagaWorld and was fired at the same time as him in April 2021, during the mass layoffs by NagaWorld. The couple was not given a reason as to why they were fired but suspect it is because they are members of LRSU. Left with limited job prospects in Phnom Penh, his wife moved to Preah Sihanouk province, where she currently works to support her daughters and family members while Sambath's mother watches over their children. Sambath is a member of the LRSU and joined the union almost 10 years ago. He was arrested on 5 February 2022 as he was leaving a COVID-19 testing site in a tuk tuk.



Sao Sambath and his wife



LRSU has organised and implemented a peaceful strike in Phnom Penh since 18 December 2021 to call for the reinstatement of 365 fired union members and leaders, and for other members who were laid off by NagaWorld in April 2021 to obtain fair severance pay according to the Cambodian Labor Law. Since 31 December 2021, at least 35 strikers have been arrested for “incitement”, pursuant to Articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code or for obstruction of enforcement measures under COVID-19 laws. Some strikers have later been released on bail provisions or after signing contracts with police, however these 10 HRDs remain in pre-trial detention.

Seven leaders and union members were charged with incitement to commit a felony on 3 January 2022 and face between six months to two years in prison if convicted. The seven women HRDs – Ms. Chhim Sithar, Ms. Chhim Sokhorn, Ms. Kleang Soben, Ms. Sun Sreypich, Ms. Hay Sopheap, Ms. Ry Sovandy, and Ms. Touch Sereymeas, are imprisoned in Correctional Center 2 (CC2).

On 5 February 2022, three more union members were charged under Article 11 of the Covid-19 law, with authorities accusing them of obstruction of enforcement measures. The charges carry between six months and three years in prison and a fine of up to 10 million riel – though the penalty increases to between two and five years in prison and a fine of up to 20 million riel if the act leads to Covid-19 infections or has “serious impact” on public health. These three - Mr. Choub Channath, Mr. Seng Vannarith and Mr. Sao Sambath - are currently imprisoned in Phnom Penh’s PJ prison. Both prisons are extremely overcrowded and prisoners are subject to inhumane conditions; CC2, for example, is currently at 161% capacity.

The right to strike is enshrined within the Cambodian Constitution, Cambodia’s Labour Law, and the Law on Trade Unions. Police claimed that strikers were arrested because the strike was illegal and affected public order and social security and that arrests were made after the issuance of several warnings to stop the strikes.