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Garment Workers Set Tires on Fire as Tax Protest Continues

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About 600 garment workers continued their strike in Phnom Penh yesterday, setting car tires alight to protest what they said were unfair salary cuts but factory representatives and labor officials described as a normal tax on income.

The workers have been protesting the tax since Friday and representatives said they would continue their protest today, hoping to force the factory into negotiations.

"The factory told us that they cut our salaries because they need to pay taxes to the government, but I don't understand why they do that," said Pen Theary, a representative for about 650 garment workers employed by the Top Form company in Russei Keo commune, a brassiere factory that supplies international brands such as Victoria's Secret.

Because the basic salary at the factory is \$61, the workers are excluded from the general tax on income. But if they work overtime, they will be subject to a five percent tax on money earned after \$125 per month, according to Cambodian law.

Ms. Theary said that although Top Form has withheld the tax

from workers' salaries since it began operations last year, workers had recently learned from friends at other factories that not every factory does, sparking the protest.

"We will continue protesting and burning tires as long as the factory refuses to negotiate the salary cuts," Ms. Theary said.

"We pay the tax to the government, but it was not our decision; the government decided," said Sam Sochea, chief of administration at Top Form. He said the factory would not enter into negotiations with the workers.

Factory representatives also refused an invitation from the Ministry of Labor's labor dispute department yesterday to negotiate between the parties. The department will invite both parties again today, but said that the workers had to comply with the law.

"All employees are obliged to pay the state's taxes, not just workers, but everyone," said Huon Soeur, the department's deputy director.

The Free Trade Union backed the workers, saying that there should be no tax on overtime wages.

"They work so hard to get this money," said Chea Mony, the union's president.