

Protesters stage EU faint-ins

Justine Drennan and Chhay Channyda

IN A YEAR in which more than a thousand Cambodian garment factory workers have fainted on the job, activists across Europe are demonstrating for higher wages and better working conditions in the Kingdom's factories.

Throughout the past week, demonstrators mimicked faintings by collapsing on the floors of H&M, Gap, Levi's and Zara outlets in European cities including London, Paris, Copenhagen, Warsaw, Amsterdam and Brussels after distributing pamphlets about Cambodian factory conditions.

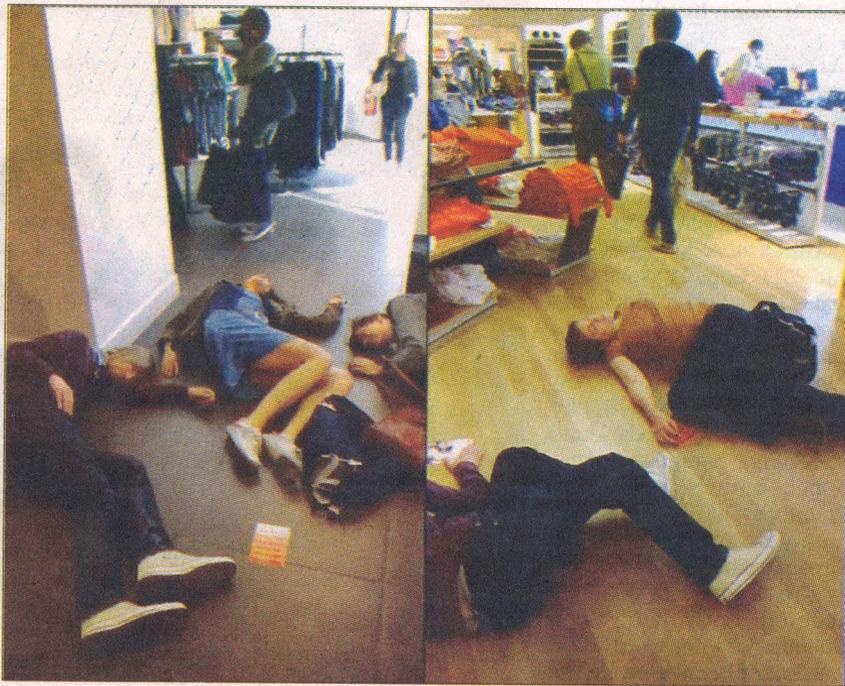
The demonstrations are part of a campaign in 11 countries "to call on popular brands to pay a living wage to workers" in Cambodia, activist group Clean Clothes Campaign said in a press release.

Jill Tucker, chief technical advisor of ILO-Better Factories Cambodia, and Dave Welsh, country director of the American Centre for International Labour Solidarity, said they approved of the intention to raise awareness, but noted that with significant international recognition of mass faintings since last summer, the key now is to search for active and nuanced policy answers.

"It doesn't really lend itself to easy solutions," Tucker said.

According to H&M media representative Anna Eriksson, the company has sent its head of sustainability to look into improving working conditions.

Eriksson added that H&M does not itself own any factories and cannot directly raise wages but is co-operating with Better Factories to prompt the government to increase minimum wage requirements.



Activists pretend to faint at H&M clothing stores in Britain over the weekend. The protest was staged to show solidarity with Cambodian garment workers. PHOTOS FROM A VIDEO SCREENSHOT

Despite such moves by H&M and other companies, faintings show little sign of abating, with another 77 female workers collapsing on Friday at Yorks Cambodia, a Svay Rieng-based branch of Japanese international glove supplier Yorks Co Ltd.

While many of the factory's workers said they fainted due to the smell of toxic chemicals, Ministry of Labour officials found no evidence of them, the ministry's health department director, Pok Vanthat, said.

"On the basis of our observations, the factory's working conditions and atmosphere are good," he said.

But Chan Sreyprum, 19, a worker receiving treatment at a private clinic in Bavet town, said: "I felt dizzy because of the unbearable poisonous smell and fainted."

Affected workers will be allowed to be off work until Tuesday without salary deductions while the others continue work as usual, she said.