

Striking the right balance

Shane Worrell and Mom Kunthear

Unions, factories deal to curb walkouts

THE NUMBER of strikes in Cambodia's garment industry could be set to dip and workers could be on their way to free lunches after both sides of the industry signed a two-year memorandum of understanding yesterday.

The MoU – inked by the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia, nine trade-union confederations and one federation – spells out terms on how to resolve industrial disputes,

with an emphasis on avoiding strikes.

Key points of the document and its annexes are that factories and workers accept Arbitration Council rulings, all parties lobby big brands to fund a food program and that the use of contentious fixed-duration contracts be addressed.

GMAC Secretary-General Ken Loo said yesterday's signing of the MoU was long due.

"The MoU circles around factories committing to binding arbitration for rights disputes," he said. "In return, unions commit to there being no strikes before the ruling."

Strikes in the garment industry were at a record low when the previous MoU was in use in 2011, Arbitration Council executive director Sok Lor told the *Post* in July when calling for it to be renewed.

Loo said he hoped the MoU would have a positive impact on reducing strikes, adding that GMAC will also encourage non-member garment factories – which operate with little regulation – to adopt the MoU.

The unions and GMAC signed a separate agreement, Loo said, to ask brands to fund a food program that would feed workers one meal a day.

Dave Welsh, American Center for

International Labor Solidarity country manager, said that all parties agreeing to urge brands to sponsor a food program was historic and could have a huge impact on an industry known for fainting and nutrition problems among its workers.

"It's certainly something that will be brought up next week [at a conference in Vietnam] with the major [brands]," he said.

A factor in the MoU proving effective,

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he added, would be both sides following what they had agreed to and accepting Arbitration Council decisions.

"What happened with the last one was there was a lot of agreement, but there was a lapse when it came to compliance," he said, adding that monitoring would be improved.

"For the unions to mature, they have to abide by it. Likewise, if a decision goes in favour of the unions, every factory has to abide.

"There is also a commitment that parties will work in good faith to resolve the issue of fixed-duration contracts by the end of the year," Welsh said.

Union groups say the perpetual use

of such contracts deprive workers of benefits. Som Aun, president of the Cambodian Labour Union Federation, said the MoU encouraged disputes to be settled without strikes.

During the MoU period last year, about 37 strikes occurred. Since it expired, there had been about 80, he said.

"I believe strikes will be reduced, and

we will solve our issues through legislative procedure."

Cambodia Alliance of Trade Union president Yang Sophorn said workers would benefit – provided both sides complied. ■

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