

Chapter 6

Employment

Hong Kong's workforce is motivated, intelligent and hardworking. The Government helps to keep it that way by safeguarding workers' rights and benefits, ensuring their workplaces are safe and healthy, and fostering a harmonious relationship between employers and employees. More measures were introduced this year to better equip the less-educated to secure work.

Hong Kong's adaptable workforce is its most treasured asset. The Government spares no effort in ensuring Hong Kong's workforce stays dynamic, motivated and skilful to contribute to Hong Kong's economic competitiveness. However, there are challenges. These include unemployment caused by economic restructuring, globalisation, greater use of information technology and corporate downsizing. The Government adopts a multi-pronged strategy to meet these challenges – for example, by upgrading the workforce, improving the business environment and increasing employment opportunities to meet the dictates of a knowledge-based economy.

During the year, the Employees Retraining Board provided about 100 000 places to retrain workers, particularly those who were made redundant, or were unemployed, to re-enter the labour market. The Government also continued to offer special help to the less competitive workers.

The Labour Department has introduced a package of market-oriented employment initiatives such as the Employment Programme for the Middle-Aged, the Work Trial Scheme, the Special Incentive Allowance Scheme for Local Domestic Helpers, the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme, the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme and the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme for job-seekers with disabilities. In addition, job fairs are held and job-matching services are provided to help job seekers to enter or re-enter the job market.

Over the past few years, the Government has created a number of temporary jobs in the public sector to help the unemployed enter or re-enter the labour market. In 2007, the funding of some 7 800 temporary jobs was regularised to meet operational needs.

The Government is committed to promoting good employer-employee relations, protecting the rights and enhancing the benefits of employees in line with Hong Kong's socio-economic development, as well as guarding the safety, and protecting the health, of employees at work.

Labour Market Situation

In 2007, Hong Kong's labour force grew by 1.7 per cent over 2006. The labour force stood at 3.64 million, of which 54 per cent were men and 46 per cent, women.

Of those employed, the majority, 86.6 per cent, were engaged in the service sectors — 34 per cent in wholesale, retail and import and export trades, restaurants and hotels; 26.4 per cent in community, social and personal services; 15.7 per cent in financing, insurance, real estate and business services; and 10.5 per cent in transport, storage and communications. Only 4.9 per cent worked in the manufacturing sector. The printing and publishing industry was the largest manufacturing industry, engaging 38 600 people by the end of 2007, followed by the food manufacturing industry, the textiles industries and the wearing apparel industry (excluding footwear), which engaged 22 800, 17 000 and 16 100 people respectively. (Details of the distribution of establishments and people employed by selected major industry groups are given in the Appendices).

Employment Situation

The labour market improved further in 2007, underpinned by a sustained pick-up in economic activities. The unemployment rate decreased from 4.8 per cent in 2006 to 4 per cent in 2007, while the underemployment rate fell from 2.4 per cent in 2006 to 2.2 per cent in 2007. Total employment rose by about 84 800, from 3 410 200 in 2006 to a new high of 3 495 000 in 2007.

Wages

Wage rates are calculated on a time basis, either daily or monthly, or on an incentive basis according to the volume of work performed. The average wage rate for employees up to the supervisory level, including daily-rated and monthly-rated employees, increased by 2.7 per cent in money terms between December 2006 and December 2007. After discounting changes in consumer prices, the average wage rate dropped by 0.7 per cent in real terms. In December 2007, the average monthly wage rate for supervisory, technical, clerical and miscellaneous non-production workers in the wholesale, retail and import and export trades, restaurants and hotels sector was \$11,753. Based on the wage indices, the average wage rate for this group increased by 2.5 per cent in money terms, but dropped by 0.9 per cent in real terms, compared with December 2006.

Over the same period, the average wage rate in the manufacturing sector rose by 2 per cent in money terms, but decreased by 1.4 per cent in real terms. The average daily wage in this sector was \$359 for craftsmen and operatives.

Labour Administration and Services

The Labour Department is headed by the Commissioner for Labour. It formulates and implements labour policies, enforces labour legislation, provides free employment services to employers and job-seekers, promotes harmonious labour relations and responsible trade unionism, safeguards employees' rights and benefits, and watches over the occupational safety, health and welfare of the workforce.

Labour Legislation

The Labour Department administers Hong Kong's labour laws. Labour legislation has been enacted which, supplemented by administrative measures, enables Hong Kong to meet internationally accepted labour standards.

In 2007, the Employment Ordinance (EO) was amended to adopt a new mode of calculation to ensure that all components of wages, as defined under the EO, including contractual commissions, are included in the calculation of relevant statutory entitlements.

There were 5 368 prosecutions for breaches of various ordinances and regulations administered by the Labour Department in 2007. These resulted in fines totalling \$23,127,751.

International Labour Affairs

Hong Kong applies 41 international labour conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). These conventions lay down standards that have a significant influence on the formulation of Hong Kong's labour laws.

Hong Kong continued to participate actively in ILO activities during the year to keep up to date with international labour issues. In June, a team comprising government, employer and employee representatives from Hong Kong took part in the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference as part of the China delegation. In August, a Hong Kong delegation attended the Asian Employment Forum in Beijing.

Labour Advisory Board

The Labour Advisory Board is a high-level tripartite and fully representative body comprising members from the employee and employer sectors as well as the Government. It advises the Commissioner for Labour on labour matters and ILO conventions and recommendations. The Labour Advisory Board comprises 12 members, six representing employers and six representing employees. The Commissioner for Labour is the ex officio chairman.

The board has five committees and one working group on special subjects including employees' compensation, employment services, occupational safety and health, labour relations, implementation of international labour standards as well as applications for labour importation under the Supplementary Labour Scheme.

Employment Services

The Labour Department provides a full range of free employment and recruitment services to job-seekers and employers through a network of 12 Job Centres, a Telephone Employment Service Centre, a Central Recruitment Unit and a Job Vacancy Processing Centre. These centres provide facilities such as vacancy search terminals, telephones, fax machines and computers with internet connection to complete the job-hunting process under one roof. The department provides round-the-clock employment services through the Interactive Employment Services (iES) website (www.jobs.gov.hk), which recorded over 922 million page views in 2007, or an average page view of 2.53 million per day. The department also organises large-scale and district-based job fairs to help job-seekers find jobs and employers to recruit staff.

During the year, 182 069 job-seekers registered with the Labour Department. The number of private sector vacancies posted by the Labour Department in 2007 was an all-time high of 559 815, or 16.6 per cent up on 2006. A historic high job placement figure of 135 489 was achieved in 2007. This was 13.9 per cent higher than the 118 937 in 2006.

Employment Programme for the Middle-aged

The Employment Programme for the Middle-aged was launched in May 2003 to assist unemployed job-seekers aged 40 or above to secure employment. Under the scheme, employers who engage middle-aged people and give them on-the-job training receive from the Government a training allowance of \$1,500 per month per trainee for up to three months. At year-end, a total of 36 256 middle-aged job-seekers were employed under the programme.

Work Trial Scheme

A Work Trial Scheme was launched in June 2005 to improve the employability of job-seekers who have special difficulties in securing jobs. There is no age limit for such applicants. On completion of the one-month trial, each participant receives \$4,500 from the Labour Department plus \$500 from the organisation for which he or she worked. By the end of 2007, 1 669 job-seekers were placed in work trials.

Transport Support Scheme

The one-year pilot Transport Support Scheme was launched in late June as one of the poverty alleviation measures to provide transport allowances to needy unemployed and low-income employees living in the four remote districts of Tuen Mun, Yuen Long, North and Islands to find jobs and work across districts. Under the scheme, time-limited transport allowance, namely Job Search Allowance (up to \$600) and Cross-district Transport Allowance (\$600 per month for up to six months) is made available to eligible applicants. By the end of 2007, the scheme had received 5 716 applications.

Helping the Disabled Find Jobs

The Labour Department's Selective Placement Division helps people with disabilities to integrate into the community through open employment. It provides free employment counselling and placement services for people with hearing or visual impairment, the physically handicapped, chronically ill, mentally handicapped, ex-mentally ill and people with specific learning difficulties and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders. The division launched a series of events in 2007 to help these people secure employment. It registered 3 666 such job-seekers and found work for 2 619 of them during the year. The figure represents an all-time high placement rate of 71.4 per cent.

The Labour Department has been running a Work Orientation and Placement Scheme since 2005 to enhance the employment prospects of people with disabilities by giving them pre-employment training. Employers participating in the scheme receive a monthly allowance from the Labour Department, equivalent to 50 per cent of what they pay the disabled employee each month (subject to a maximum of \$3,000) for up to three months. By year-end, 920 people had undergone pre-employment training and 908 had found jobs.

Employment Agencies

The Labour Department's Employment Agencies Administration enforces Part XII of the Employment Ordinance and the Employment Agency Regulations. It carries out checks on them, investigates complaints against them and plays other watchdog roles. In 2007, it issued 1 830 employment agency licences, revoked one and rejected one renewal application.

Preparing People for Work

Careers Guidance

The Careers Advisory Service of the Labour Department helps young people choose careers best suited to them through education.

During the year, student groups visited the Labour Department's Careers Information Centre and various commercial and industrial establishments. In addition, the Education and Careers Expo 2007 attracted 191 651 visitors.

The Labour Department set up a youth employment resource centre called 'Youth Employment Start' in December to provide one-stop career advisory and support services to young people aged between 15 and 29. The centre provides career assessments, career guidance, value-added training, support services for the self-employed, and labour market information to help these young people plan their careers, enhance their job prospects, and lend them support in carrying out their own businesses.

Skills Upgrading Scheme

A \$400-million Skills Upgrading Scheme (SUS) was set up in 2001 to provide focused skills training for in-service workers to adapt to the changing economic environment.

By the end of 2007, more than 9 900 classes had been held and more than 199 700 training places were provided under the scheme. The environmental hygiene industry joined the scheme in 2007, bringing to 25 the number of industries under the scheme.

Youth Pre-employment Training Programme

The 2006-2007 schedule of the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme (YPTP) in which 6 500 trainees took part, ended in October. Launched in 1999, the YPTP was drawn up to enhance the employability of school leavers, aged between 15 and 19, through employment-related training, workplace attachment, careers counselling and support services. The 2007-08 programme is being carried out in two phases. The first phase, which started in September, attracted over 3 500 participants.

Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme

The Labour Department launched the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme (YWETS) in July 2002 to provide six to 12 months of on-the-job training for people aged between 15 and 24, with no university degree. It keeps in touch with employers in the private and public sectors to see if they have training vacancies.

The Labour Department also commissions non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to carry out induction courses for these young people and to help them plan their careers, identify jobs that suit them, prepare them for job interviews, and to help them adapt to their working environment after they had secured their jobs.

By year-end, 36 326 young people were receiving training and 17 690 got jobs on the open market.

To enable them to get the most out of their training, apprentices are allowed to move between the YPTP and YWETS at different stages of their training.

Under the 2007-08 programme, trainees taking a YPTP modular training course, or YWETS induction course, who have an attendance rate of higher than 80 per cent, are given a transport allowance.

Employees Retraining Scheme

The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) was set up under the Employees Retraining Ordinance in 1992 to help eligible workers adjust to changes in the economic environment. It is a statutory body comprising employer and employee representatives, and people carrying out work on vocational training, retraining and manpower planning, as well as government officials. In addition to receiving a regular income from a levy from labour importation schemes, the ERB received a recurrent subvention from the Government which, in 2007-08, amounted to some \$365 million.

Since its inception 15 years ago, the ERB had been helping workers, displaced as a result of economic restructuring, to re-enter the job market through retraining. It concentrated mainly on assisting those aged 30 or above with no more than lower secondary education.

The criterion for joining the Employees Retraining Scheme was relaxed in December to cover all eligible workers aged 15 or above with education attainment at sub-degree or below. The move opens the way for more people to receive training or retraining.

The ERB is also carrying out a review of its role and responsibilities in order to widen the scope of its training and retraining services and to enhance their quality.

The ERB offers a wide variety of full-time and part-time courses provided by a network of more than 50 training bodies. The major courses cover job search skills, specific skills for different industries and general skills (computer and vocational languages). New courses catering to the training needs of the expanded target groups are being developed to improve the trainee's job prospects and to help the retrained person keep his or her job.

In order to strengthen the Employees Retraining Scheme and to foster the spirit of lifelong learning, the ERB runs two Retraining Resource centres, one in Cheung Sha Wan and the other at Lok Fu, to provide a wide range of self-learning facilities, job market information and other supporting services to graduate retrainees.

The Integrated Scheme for Local Domestic Helpers, an initiative formally launched in May 2002, provides a one-stop service for job matching, job referral and follow-up services for employers and graduate retrainees of domestic helper courses. A Special Incentive Allowance Scheme for Local Domestic Helpers was introduced by the Labour Department in June 2003 to promote the services of local domestic helpers and to address the mismatch in supply and demand. Under the scheme, retrainees who have passed the domestic helper course are given an incentive allowance if he or she needs to work across districts or during odd hours. By the end of 2007, about \$48 million had been paid out to 11 756 workers receiving the allowance.

An ERB service, introduced in 2002 for carrying out standardised assessment of the skills of workers retrained as domestic helpers, has now been extended to assessing the skills of workers who took other ERB courses, including courses on personal care work, healthcare massage, hotel room attendant work, hotel public area cleaning work, post-natal care, infant care, child care and home care for the elderly.

Continuing Education Fund

A \$5 billion Continuing Education Fund was launched in June 2002 to subsidise adults who wish to pursue continuing education and training courses in specified sectors/domains. Eligible applicants are reimbursed 80 per cent of their fees, up to \$10,000 per person, on successful completion of a reimbursable course or module forming part of the course. Over 414 800 applications had been received by the end of 2007.

Labour Relations

Labour relations in Hong Kong remained harmonious. In 2007, the Labour Department's Labour Relations Division handled 124 trade disputes, a fall of 38 per cent from 2006. There were three work stoppages, resulting in the loss of 8 027 working days. The average loss was 2.26 working days per 1 000 salaried employees and wage-earners. This was higher than previous years and was caused mainly by a strike by bar-benders during the year. Nevertheless, the average loss of working days per 1 000 employees and wage-earners in Hong Kong is still among the lowest in the world. During the year, the division handled 21 698 claims for wages and other employment-related benefits or entitlements. This represented a decrease of 13 per cent from 2006. The division settled 71.7 per cent of all disputes and claims it handled in 2007 – the highest success rate in 13 years.

The Labour Department organises a wide variety of activities such as talks, seminars and exhibitions to enhance public understanding of the Employment Ordinance. It also produces a wide range of free publications for the public. Information on the subject is also disseminated through the department's website and the media.

The department promotes tripartite dialogue at the industry level by setting up committees comprising employers, employees and labour officials. The department helped set up nine tripartite committees to deal with matters concerning the catering, construction, theatre, logistics, property management, printing, hotel and tourism, cement and concrete, and retail industries.

At the enterprise level, the department promotes good labour management practices and effective communication. Eighteen human resources managers' clubs have been established. Experience-sharing sessions and briefings are organised for members.

Trade Unions

The Registry of Trade Unions administers the Trade Unions Ordinance and promotes good and responsible trade union management. Once registered, a trade union becomes a body corporate and enjoys immunity from certain civil suits.

In 2007, 18 new unions were registered, bringing the number of registered trade unions to 775 (comprising 731 employee unions, 21 employers' associations and 23 organisations comprising employees and employers). There were also three registered trade union federations. In the past five years, the declared membership of employee unions and the trade union participation rate have averaged around 660 000 and about 21 per cent respectively.

About half of the employee unions are affiliated to four major labour organisations registered under the Societies Ordinance. They are the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (176 unions), the Hong Kong and Kowloon Trades Union Council (30 unions), the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (76 unions), and the Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions (62 unions).

Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund

The Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund provides ex gratia payment to employees who are owed wages and other termination benefits by insolvent employers. It is financed by a levy imposed on each business registration certificate. The fund covers arrears of wages not exceeding \$36,000 accrued during a period of four months preceding the applicant's last day of service; wages in lieu of notice for termination of employment of up to \$22,500 or one month's wages, whichever is less; and severance payment of up to \$50,000 plus 50 per cent of any entitlement in excess of \$50,000.

As a result of the economy's continuing improvement and the Labour Department's all-out efforts in combating wage defaults, the number of applications for the fund fell from 7 532 in 2006 to 4 836 in 2007, the lowest since 1990. The fund's financial position also improved — showing a surplus of \$442 million in 2007. During the year, the fund paid out \$95 million to 4 913 applicants.

Employees' Rights and Benefits

The Employment Ordinance provides for various employment-related benefits and entitlements to employees. Apart from statutory requirements, employers and employees are free to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment.

Since December 2000, all employers have had to enrol their employees in Mandatory Provident Fund schemes. At the end of the year, 99.5 per cent of employers had joined the schemes, which are regulated by the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority.

Labour Conditions

The employment of children under 15 is generally prohibited by law. Subject to stringent rules, children aged 13 and 14 may be employed in non-industrial establishments. Young people aged between 15 and 17 may work in industrial establishments, subject to regulations governing their employment conditions. Specific provisions under labour legislation protect workers' safety, health and welfare.

Labour inspectors conduct rigorous workplace inspections to monitor employers' compliance with the various provisions stipulated in labour laws to safeguard the statutory rights and benefits of local and imported workers, and to ensure that employers possess valid employees' compensation insurance policies. Labour inspectors also check employees' proof of identity during workplace inspections and work with the Police and the Immigration Department to combat illegal employment. In 2007, some 170 joint operations were conducted. The department also publicised widely the complaint hotline (2815 2200) to encourage people to report illegal employment activities.

Companies providing services to the Government under service contracts which rely heavily on the deployment of non-skilled workers are required to sign a standard employment contract with the workers. The contract, which sets out the employment terms, helps safeguard the rights and benefits of the non-skilled workers.

Stepping Up Enforcement Against Wage Offences

The Labour Department continued to step up enforcement action against employers who fail to pay wages due to their employees. The department secured convictions for 960 summonses relating to wage offences in 2007, an all-time high, or 22 per cent up on 785 convictions in 2006. Five company directors and two employers were jailed or given suspended jail sentences for wage defaults. In addition, two company directors were imposed community service orders.

Employees' Compensation

Hong Kong's employees' compensation system adopts the 'no-fault' principle whereby compensation is payable irrespective of whether the injury, occupational disease or death is the employee's fault. The Employees' Compensation Ordinance (ECO) covers injuries or death caused by accidents arising from, and in the course of, employment or by specified occupational diseases. An employer must be in possession of a valid insurance policy to cover his liabilities both under the ordinance and common law. The Labour Department launched the Voluntary Rehabilitation Programme on a trial basis for the construction industry in 2003. The programme was first drawn up to help construction workers injured at work to recover faster through better care. It has since been extended to all industries in phases.

The Employees' Compensation Division of the Labour Department, which administers the ECO, assists injured employees and the families of deceased employees to obtain compensation from their employers. It also administers a scheme that provides interest-free loans to workers injured in job-related accidents. In 2007, loans totalling \$105,000 were made to seven injured employees and to the dependents of deceased employees.

The Employees Compensation Assistance Scheme helps the injured employees, or family members of the deceased employees to obtain compensation from defaulting employers. The scheme is financed by a levy imposed on all employees' compensation insurance policies taken out by employers.

In 2007, the Labour Department held seminars, distributed leaflets and made announcements on TV and radio to help employers and employees better understand their rights and obligations under the ECO.

Pneumoconiosis sufferers are eligible for compensation under the Pneumoconiosis (Compensation) Ordinance administered by the Pneumoconiosis Compensation Fund Board. Those diagnosed before the ordinance went into force in 1981 may receive ex gratia benefits from the Government under the Pneumoconiosis Ex Gratia Scheme. By the end of the year, 2 081 pneumoconiosis sufferers were receiving payments under the ordinance or the ex gratia scheme. Family members of 82 pneumoconiosis sufferers who died as a result of the disease were also granted compensation.

The Occupational Deafness Compensation Board administers the Occupational Deafness Compensation Scheme which compensates employees with noise-induced deafness for having worked in specified noisy industries. In 2007, the board approved

47 applications and paid out \$4.6 million as compensation. It approved 289 applications for hearing aids, amounting to \$710,000. The board also runs rehabilitation programmes for people with impaired hearing due to their jobs. In 2007, the board provided 321 such programmes.

Wage Protection Movement

The question of minimum wage and standard working hours remains a matter of public concern. However, views within the community on whether a statutory minimum wage and standard working hours should be introduced differ. After taking into account the views of stakeholders and having considered Hong Kong's socio-economic situation, the Government concluded that the practical approach at this stage would be to provide wage protection for cleaning workers and security guards through non-legislative means. As a result, the Government joined the business community and the labour sector in 2005 to launch a Wage Protection Movement (WPM). Under the WPM, employers are required to pay their cleaning workers and security guards wages not lower than the relevant average market rates, and enter into written employment contracts with these workers. If the workers have to work beyond the contractual hours, they should be compensated adequately.

The Government will conduct a review in October 2008 to evaluate its effectiveness. If the overall review finds that the WPM fails to yield satisfactory results, the Government will introduce a statutory minimum wage for cleaning workers and security guards.

Minor Employment Claims Adjudication Board

The Minor Employment Claims Adjudication Board adjudicates claims under the Employment Ordinance and in accordance with individual employment contracts. The board hears and determines employment claims involving not more than 10 claimants for a sum of money not exceeding \$8,000 per claimant. During the year, the board adjudicated 2 276 claims and gave awards amounting to \$4.8 million.

Labour Tribunal

The Labour Tribunal is part of the Judiciary and provides a quick, inexpensive and informal method of adjudicating disputes between employees and employers, which are not within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Minor Employment Claims Adjudication Board.

During the year, 6 160 cases were filed with the tribunal, of which 6 099 were initiated by employees and 61 by employers. Of these, 84.5 per cent were referred by the Labour Department's Labour Relations Division after unsuccessful conciliation attempts. In 2007, the tribunal dealt with 6 066 cases and granted awards totalling more than \$265 million, or 477 cases and \$74 million less than in 2006.

Imported Workers

Entry for Employment

The Immigration Department is responsible for handling matters relating to the entry of non-local people for employment. Non-local people may work in Hong Kong

if they possess special skills, knowledge or experience of value to and not readily available in Hong Kong and receive remuneration package broadly commensurate with those on the market.

Bona fide business people and entrepreneurs who can make substantial contribution to the economy are welcome to establish a presence in Hong Kong, bringing with them capital and expertise. Qualified professionals, technical people, administrators and managers are also admitted with minimum formalities. During the year, 32 459 non-local professionals and people with technical, administrative or managerial skills from more than 100 countries/territories were admitted for employment.

Employment of Non-local Students

On October 26, 2007, the Government announced that from the 2008-09 academic year onwards, non-local fresh graduates of full-time locally-accredited programmes at degree level or above may stay for one year in Hong Kong without any restriction to take up employment. Those who have previously obtained a degree or higher qualification in a full-time locally-accredited programme in Hong Kong may also return to work in Hong Kong so long as the job is at a level commonly taken up by degree holders and offers market rate remuneration package.

Supplementary Labour Scheme

Under the Supplementary Labour Scheme, employers may apply to import workers to fill vacancies at technician level or below. The Government's policy on importation of labour is based on two cardinal principles:

- local workers must be given priority in filling job vacancies available in the market; and
- employers who are genuinely unable to recruit local workers to fill their vacancies should be allowed to import workers.

All applications under the scheme are considered on a case-by-case basis. To ensure priority of employment for local workers, each application to import workers has to pass three tests before it is submitted to the Labour Advisory Board for consideration and to the Government for a decision. These tests are: advertising in newspapers, job-matching by the Labour Department for four weeks, and organising retraining courses with the assistance of the Employees Retraining Board for local workers, if appropriate.

As at the end of 2007, there were 1 101 imported workers working in Hong Kong.

Foreign Domestic Helpers

Foreign domestic helpers may be admitted if they have relevant working experience and if their employers are Hong Kong residents who are prepared to offer reasonable terms of employment including suitable accommodation and wages not lower than the level of the minimum allowable wage set by the Government. Their

employers are required to pay their passage from and to their places of origin. Employers must also meet the requirements on income and assets.

The demand for foreign domestic helpers has increased over the past three decades. At the end of 2007, there were 245 531 such helpers in Hong Kong, an increase of 5.5 per cent over the 232 781 in 2006. About 50.3 per cent were from the Philippines and 46.6 per cent from Indonesia.

Occupational Safety and Health

The Labour Department strives to improve safety and health at the workplace through legislation, law enforcement, promotion, education and training. Safety at work in Hong Kong has improved significantly as a result of the concerted effort of all parties concerned, including employers, employees, contractors, safety practitioners and the Government.

In 2007, the number of occupational injuries stood at 43 979, representing a drop of 30.8 per cent from 63 526 in 1998. The number of industrial accidents also fell from 43 034 in 1998 to 16 117 in 2007, down by 62.5 per cent. In the construction industry, the number of accidents recorded a substantial decrease of 84.5 per cent from 19 588 in 1998 to 3 042 in 2007. During the year, a total of 177 occupational disease cases were confirmed, representing a drop of 33 per cent from 264 in 2006 and a cumulative fall of 81 per cent from the peak of 948 cases in 1998. The most common occupational diseases were silicosis, occupational deafness and tenosynovitis (inflammation of a tendon sheath) of the hand or forearm.

Enforcement

The Labour Department focuses its inspections on high-risk industries and closely monitors organisations with poor safety records. Apart from routine inspections, the department also conducts special enforcement campaigns targeting accident-prone industries and work situations such as those involving the use of tower cranes. Others closely watched include mobile plants, construction, building repair and maintenance, container handling and storage, wholesale and retail, catering, working-at-height, use of ladders, fire prevention and use of chemicals. A total of 1 448 improvement notices were issued and 171 suspension notices were served on companies and organisations in 2007, requiring them to remove imminent risks to life and limb at their workplaces. There were 2 073 prosecutions under the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance and the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance heard in court. The conviction rate was 85.4 per cent and fines totalled more than \$16 million.

In 2007, the Labour Department stepped up inspections of drainage works to ensure drainage workers were protected from gas poisoning. Altogether, 46 warnings and four improvement notices were issued and two prosecutions initiated.

Following the collapse of a tower crane in July in which two workers were killed, the department stepped up enforcement action to prevent similar accidents. An intensive operation was carried out in the same month to ensure such appliances were used properly, as well as maintained, installed, modified and dismantled correctly. As a result of the operation, 10 suspension/improvement notices were

issued and 10 prosecutions were initiated. In addition, the department worked closely with the Construction Industry Council and other bodies in the industry to formulate and implement measures to further enhance safety in the use of tower cranes.

Promotion and Education

In 2007, the department launched a variety of promotional campaigns and publicity drives to enhance occupational safety and health protection. The activities included seminars, safety forums, thematic talks, roving exhibitions, TV and radio announcements, radio programmes, publications on occupational safety and health, promoting the Occupational Safety Charter and Occupational Hygiene Charter, and formulating safety award schemes for the construction and the catering industries.

The Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance requires mandatory basic safety training for people engaged in construction work and container handling. On satisfactory completion of their training programme, workers are given a certificate, commonly known as the Green Card. To revalidate the certificate, the worker has to attend a half-day refresher course every three years. By the end of 2007, over 917 000 people had obtained the Green Card for working at construction sites and container handling workplaces while some 526 000 workers had completed the half-day refresher course.

The Labour Department's Occupational Safety and Health Training Centre conducts training courses and talks to help workers better understand the requirements of occupational safety and health laws. In 2007, the centre organised over 800 such courses and talks for some 16 000 employees.

The department gives outreaching talks to the public as well as companies and organisations. In 2007, a total of 1 464 health talks were delivered and a series of booklets on safety and health at work in relation to common diseases affecting the working population was published.

Occupational Health Clinics

The Labour Department's Kwun Tong Occupational Health Clinic and Fanling Occupational Health Clinic provide clinical occupational health service for workers in Hong Kong. In 2007, the two clinics conducted a total of 13 098 clinical consultations.

Occupational Safety and Health Council

The Occupational Safety and Health Council was established in 1988 to foster a safe and healthy working environment in Hong Kong through training, promotional, consultancy, research and information services.

The council regularly reviews and designs courses catering to the changing needs of society. In 2007, a total of 33 521 people attended 1 601 training courses organised for managers, supervisors and frontline workers. Special safety training courses were also conducted for minority groups. The council continues to participate in the Skills Upgrading Scheme to improve occupational safety and health (OSH) standards for stakeholders of industries under the Scheme.

A safety culture index and safe work behaviour were widely publicised in the council's Safety and Health Improvement Partnership Scheme to enhance OSH performance in Hong Kong. In June 2007, the council launched its first seminar to promote corporate social responsibility in OSH.

To further hammer the OSH message across to the public, the council published the fourth safety tool book, *500 Questions on OSH*, which is sold in bookstores in Hong Kong and Macao. The council also organised the 4th 'Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao Safety Quiz' show which strengthened cooperation among cities in the region and facilitated the exchange of views on OSH practices.

As an affiliate safe community support centre of the World Health Organisation, the council continues to promote OSH at the community level. The council drew up guidelines for the accreditation schemes of the 'Safe and Healthy Estates', 'Safe and Healthy Schools' and 'Safe and Healthy Residential Care Homes' to help local communities to implement OSH improvement programmes in a systematic manner.

The council continues to provide small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with technical advice and financial support by strengthening the SME Sponsorship Schemes. In addition to the five sponsorship schemes currently in place for various trades and industries, new schemes to providing first aid boxes, cut-free gloves and non-slippery shoes for the catering industry were introduced.

Websites

Labour and Welfare Bureau: www.lwb.gov.hk

Education Bureau: www.edb.gov.hk

Security Bureau: www.sb.gov.hk

Labour Department: www.labour.gov.hk

Occupational Safety and Health Council: www.oshc.org.hk

Immigration Department: www.immd.gov.hk

Employees Retraining Board: www.erb.org