

Government response to labour groups' demands

In response to the demands of different labour groups, a Government spokesman today (May 1) said that the Government would continue to spare no effort in improving workers' benefits and protection, and enhancing occupational safety and health (OSH) in various industries at a pace commensurate with Hong Kong's overall socio-economic development. The Government would take into account both employees' interests and employers' abilities to afford the benefits, despite the severe blow dealt by the COVID-19 epidemic to the local economy.

"The seasonally adjusted unemployment and underemployment rates for January to March this year have soared to their highest levels in recent years. The labour market will continue to face significant pressure in the near term. The Government has rolled out relief measures of unprecedented scale, including the one-off measures in the 2020-21 Budget and two rounds of measures under the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) totalling \$287.5 billion (around 10 per cent of local Gross Domestic Product), with a view to preserving the vitality of the economy and relieving people's financial burden," the spokesman said.

"The Government will launch as soon as possible the Employment Support Scheme under the second round of AEF, with a total commitment of \$81 billion, to provide time-limited financial support to employers to help them retain employees who will otherwise be made redundant."

Moreover, the Government has earmarked \$6 billion to create around 30 000 time-limited jobs in the public and private sectors in the coming two years for people with different skills and academic qualifications. In addition, the Labour Department (LD) would raise the ceiling of the on-the-job training (OJT) allowance payable to employers under the Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged, the Youth Employment and Training Programme and the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme in the second half of this year; and launch a pilot scheme simultaneously to encourage eligible participants of these programmes to undergo and complete the OJT, through the provision of a retention allowance, thereby stabilising employment.

On improvements to other labour benefits, the spokesman said, "The Government is working at full steam on the preparatory work for the abolition of the arrangement of 'offsetting' severance payments and long service payments with employers' mandatory contributions under the Mandatory Provident Fund System. The Government will strive to introduce the enabling bill into the Legislative Council (LegCo) by the end of this year, aiming to secure its passage by 2022.

"The Government introduced the Employment (Amendment) Bill 2019 into LegCo on January 8 this year. The Bill, which proposes to extend statutory

maternity leave by four weeks, is now being handled by the LegCo Panel on Manpower.

"The Chief Executive announced on January 14 this year 10 new initiatives on improving people's livelihood, one of which is to increase progressively the number of statutory holidays so that it will be on par with that of general holidays. The Government will work out the relevant proposal, invite the Labour Advisory Board to discuss, and will facilitate and support its work.

"Meanwhile, the Minimum Wage Commission is conducting a new round of review on the Statutory Minimum Wage rate and will submit a report on its recommendation to the Chief Executive in Council by end-October."

"The Government attaches great importance to employees' OSH. The LD has been adjusting its strategies of inspection and enforcement, publicity and promotion as well as education and training according to the OSH risk levels of different industries, driving employers and employees to work together in taking sufficient precautionary measures to prevent accidents," the spokesman added.