

Legislators throw out bid to exempt 160,000 domestics from bill

Amahs gain maternity benefits

By Priscilla Cheung
and Lucia Palpal-Iatoc

LEGISLATORS yesterday rejected an attempt by employers to exempt about 160,000 foreign domestic helpers from enhanced maternity benefits.

A Liberal Party-backed proposal to exempt foreign domestic helpers, mostly Filipinos, from the Employment (Amendment) Bill 1996 lost by 35-13 votes.

The 13 included nine Liberal members, three independents and a New Hong Kong Alliance legislator.

The amendment provides 10-week maternity leave for pregnant women who have been employed continuously for four months, compared with the previous 26 weeks.

It also grants maternity benefits regardless of the number of children. Under the old law benefits did not cover pregnancies after the second child.

The amendment also prohibits an employer from requiring a pregnant worker to do heavy, hazardous or harmful chores.

Liberal Party legislator Selina Chow Liang Shuk-yeet sought to exempt

foreign workers from the enhanced benefits after lobbying by the 1,000-strong Hong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association.

Frontier legislator Leung Yiu-chung said the proposal was discriminatory.

"Everyone should be equal in front of employment laws," he said.

"The goal is to improve workers' rights. The benefits must be affordable . . . the employers should not be put in a difficult situation."

"Aren't they (foreign domestic helpers) workers too? Aren't they humans too?"

Ms Chow said an employer would stand to lose more than a factory owner under the new law.

She said most employers were lower-middle to middle class who could not afford to lose their helpers during pregnancy.

Liberal legislator Miriam Lau Kin-yeet, chairman of the Bills Committee, said countries such as Britain and Singapore exempted domestic helpers from labour laws.

"The goal (of the law) is to improve the workers' rights. The benefits must be affordable to the employers, and the employers should not be put in a difficult situation."

Secretary for Education and Manpower Joseph Wong Wing-ping said there would be a review of maternity benefits for foreign domestic helpers by the middle of next year.

He said the Labour Department would issue a list of chores that might be considered dangerous.

Chairwoman of the Asian Domestic Workers Union Remy Borlongan said: "This move shows that Hong Kong society does not discriminate against foreign domestic helpers and also recognises our contribution to the economy."

United Filipinos in Hong Kong chairwoman Connie Bragas-Regalado said it was only right for domestic helpers to be protected.

AKS
Lau Kin-yeet
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