

# Action on dangerous chemicals

By MICHELLE INNIS

LABOUR groups are to tackle the Government head-on over the use of dangerous chemicals in factories — this time with the backing of more than 30,000 workers.

The campaign, which will be launched on November 20, is the biggest yet by labour and church groups and will see thousands of pamphlets and cards distributed to Hongkong's factories.

Workers will be told what sort of chemicals are used in local factories and what effect they have on workers' health.

Ten labour and church groups, lead by the independent Christian Industrial Committee (CIC), are spearheading the campaign.

There is no legislation in Hongkong to force employers to reveal to employees the nature of the chemicals used in factories.

Employers are under no obligation, according to a Labour Department spokesman, to reveal to their employees how chemicals may affect their health.

"The CIC has spent several weeks talking to workers at various industrial sites about chemicals used in factories," CIC spokesman Miss April Li said.

"None of the workers we spoke with knew what chemicals were being used in their factories or how they affected their health, although they handle them every day.

"We have lobbied the Government several times over this issue because Hongkong has 200,000 factory workers dealing with chemicals daily. But nothing has been done."

A Labour Department spokesman said yesterday a departmental factory inspector had been sent to the United Kingdom in 1984 to study laws there governing the labelling and use of dangerous chemicals in factories.

He said the inspector had produced a report, which was later modified by a working party to suit Hongkong's "special conditions", and regulations were being drafted.

"These will be put to the Legislative Council," he said.

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But a spokesman for the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims, Mr Lee Chuk-yan, said yesterday he did not expect to see laws governing the use of chemicals in factories for at least another two years.

"The Government has been so slow on this issue," he said.

"We have heard no positive news from the Government, even though we have pressured the Labour Department on this issue.

"There are too few rights for factory employees when it comes to dangerous chemicals."

The Labour Department spokesman said under the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance, factories were obliged to comply with certain safety standards.

But he admitted the Labour Department was short-staffed and factory inspections to ensure regulations were enforced might be carried out only once every 4½ years.

Miss Li said CIC members would visit factory sites in Hongkong and distribute 30,000 printed cards on November 20.

She said the cards would set out the names of various chemicals and the effect they have on health. Workers would be asked to report to the CIC any activities at their workplace which they felt could be endangering their health.

"We are setting off a trigger by making workers aware of what diseases they could be exposed to through working with chemicals," she said.

"If they read the cards they will recognise the ill effects the chemicals are having.

"If they get a sore throat they can relate it to the particular chemical they are handling at work."

Miss Li said information collected from the workers would then be used to pressure the Government into implementing legislation.

She said chemicals such as cyanide, benzene and trichloroethylene were used in many of Hongkong's factories.