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25,000 in job disputes over shift to China

By JACQUELINE LEE

MORE than 25,000 factory workers have complained to a joint labour group in the past year about unfair treatment by employers who moved their businesses to China.

The majority of the workers said they had been sacked without redundancy pay, while others said they suffered unreasonable treatment from their bosses designed to force them to leave.

One in four workers said they had been given work below the minimum legal requirement and had been unable to earn a full wage.

The complaints were received by a coalition of 13 labour unions, the Joint Association of Labour to Tackle Factory Migration, which has been monitoring labour disputes arising from the movement of Hongkong factories into China.

Releasing the results yesterday, association spokesman Lee Cheuk-yan said a total of 434 cases were brought to their attention, involving 25,000 workers mostly from textile, electronics, plastics, metal work and shoe-making industries.

A textile worker who only identified herself as Miss Cheung, said her income shrank by 75 per cent

after her employer set up a new plant in Shenzhen in late 1987.

She now worked one day a week and earned about \$1,000 a month, compared with the minimum of twelve days in four weeks stipulated under the Employment Ordinance.

Miss Cheung said some of her colleagues resigned and her employer used the Hongkong plant mainly as a business office.

She said she would lose a significant sum of money in severance pay if she resigned after nearly six years' employment with the factory.

Another woman, identified as Miss Yuen from a San Po Kong textile factory, claimed her employer falsified workers' attendance records to cover up the massive volume of goods made in his China plant.

The near-finished products were transported into Hongkong for final processing so that they could be labelled as being made in Hongkong and exported under Hongkong quota, she said.

"We were paid at piece-rate, but he needed the attendance records to show to Trade and Industry Department officials when they came to check," Miss Yuen said.

Workers in the Hongkong factory were used only as a spare team for orders spilling over from the mainland plant, she added.

Mr Lee said that in a campaign about a year ago, workers reported about 100 garment factories which had moved production to China.

He said many employers tried to force long-time workers to resign by transferring them to much lower paid jobs, cutting piece-rate salaries, scrapping benefits such as year-end bonuses, putting workers on undesirable work schedules, or refusing to give pay rises.

The association urged the Government to increase the minimum work required from 12 days in four consecutive weeks to 16 days in four weeks and 54 days in 12 weeks.

The Labour Advisory Board last week endorsed a proposal to increase the required minimum work to two-thirds of the total number of working days in 26 consecutive weeks.

The group also suggested extending the Wage Protection and Insolvency Fund to cover severance pay, and compelling employers to set up a reserve fund within their companies so they would have ready cash to pay out employees' entitlements.