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2,323 foreign workers to take HK jobs

By JACQUELINE LEE

THE Government is allowing 2,323 overseas workers - 75 per cent of them from China - to take up jobs in Hongkong under the controversial skilled labour importation scheme.

The workers, expected in October, will be craftsmen and technicians to be employed solely on construction sites, in machine shops, electrical and electronics workshops, hotels and restaurants and car factories.

Apart from China, the foreign workers will be recruited mainly from the Philippines and Thailand.

Director of Administration Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, who heads a steering group overseeing the scheme, said the results mirrored employers' genuine needs, despite the high refusal rate of 73 per cent, or 6,156 out of 8,479 cases.

"All applications were vetted strictly against the published criteria. The results are a good reflection of what is needed by employers provided they are willing to pay the right amount of wages," he said.

More than half - 3,292 - of the failed cases were rejected because the workers sought were only semi-skilled or unskilled labour.

In another 1,543 cases, the employers applied for more than the maximum number permitted, while 1,163 cases were turned down because employers refused to offer market wages.

A total of 158 cases were withdrawn after application.

These applications came mostly from the construction, hotel and clothing industries.

"I'm slightly surprised (at the refusal rate). But we realised from the outset there was a large number of vacancies for semi-skilled and unskilled jobs," Mr Tsang said.

But he noted that the scheme covered only skilled workers and whether to broaden the importation to include semi-skilled and unskilled workers was a matter for the Executive Council.

Legislator Councillor Martin Barrow who heads a coalition of nine major industrial and employers' groups to press the Government on imported labour, expressed disappointment at the large number of rejections.

"The result is somewhat disappointing and I believe the Government must continue to look at in the long term - the overall issue of labour supply and demand," he said.

The director of the Christian Industrial Committee, Mr Lau Chin-shek, said the high refusal rate reflected an attempt by employers to "conjure up a false image of labour shortage in order to be able to import cheap labour".

Mr Lau said many job vacancies were being filled by school leavers and Hongkong workers returning from the mainland after the Beijing massacre.

The chairman of the 12,000-member Hongkong Construction Industry Employees' General Union, Mr Poon To-chuen, feared that the import of about 800 site workers would hinder salary increases in the trade and local workers would have difficulty finding enough work.

"Our workers already find that work now comes slower than before. This is certainly not the right time to import building workers," he said.

Mr Tsang said there was no evidence from official statistics of the labour market becoming less tight.

He said the steering group would continue to monitor the local labour situation before deciding on any further imports.

"We're open minded. We're going to watch to what extent local wages will be affected by the import of these workers," he said.

"The workers are allowed to come in under a two-year contract and there will be no renewal of contract.

"In other words there should not be any long term impact on the labour force, assuming at the end of two years there will be mechanisation in industries," he said.

Among the 2,323 places granted, 846 will go to the construction industry, 401 to the machine shop trade, 299 to the electrical and electronics, 219 to the hotel, catering, and tourist trade and 214 to the car industries.