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# 40pc rise in work days lost to strikes

By JACQUELINE LEE

HONGKONG recorded its worst strike record for three years in 1989, mainly because of the China Motor Bus drivers' dispute.

Labour Department statistics show there were seven strikes in the territory, causing a total loss of 3,270 working days.

This represents a 40 per cent jump from the 2,345 days lost in eight stoppages the previous year.

It was also the first time the record showed an increase in three years.

Fourteen work stoppages in 1987 caused 2,773 lost working days, while a total of 4,907 days were lost in nine stoppages in 1986.

But acting Senior Labour Officer, Mr Chan Sung-tai, said the increase did not indicate a setback in labour relations in Hongkong.

He stressed that the CMB two-day strike in late November had added to the figures significantly.

Up until the first half of last year, the department registered only 172 days lost through strike action.

"The rise in working days lost last year does not indicate that the overall situation has worsened," said Mr Chan.

"Labour relations in Hongkong have been improving in the past few years and our strike record tends to be on the low side compared with many other countries."

But Hongkong Federation of Trade Unions vice-chairman, Miss Lam Shuk-yee, disagreed, saying the strike figures did not reflect the whole picture as workers did not take industrial action to air their dissatisfaction in every case.

"The CMB case shows that labour disputes can remain dormant for years before they come to a head," she said.

Present labour relations in Hongkong were still far from good although there had been some improvement since the 1960s, said Miss Lam.

"We have had fewer labour disputes in recent years because of the relative economic stability. But today Hongkong workers still have no right of collective bargaining and most employers still do not accept that workers should have the right to negotiate with employers on an equal footing."

The vast majority of companies have no proper channel for employer-employee communication which often causes problems to deteriorate, said Miss Lam.

"If we don't improve the system now, we will be caught unprepared when problems erupt at times of an economic downturn," she said.

Of last year's major disputes, about 1,700 CMB drivers joined the two-day strike during morning rush hours to press for better retirement benefits.

Government midwives walked out to back their demands to be given a special allowance granted to doctors and nurses.

Public hospital doctors and nurses mounted work-to-rule campaigns to back their demands for improved pay and working conditions, and to solve severe staff wastage in the medical profession.

And catering services of several airlines were disrupted when 1,200 Swire Air Caterers workers walked out to press their claims for an overtime allowance.