

Labour fights for provident fund

Blast shadowed union victories

by

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IT HAS been a mixed year of sorrow and triumph for labour unions in Hongkong.

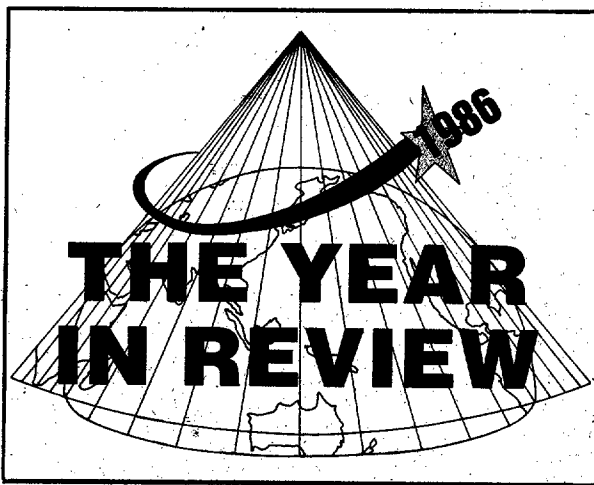
Although unions won battles in 1986 in many areas in their fight for better protection for workers, the catastrophic explosion two months ago in a Swai Chung fur factory was an event that made the year's end a sorrowful one for union members.

Most unions see the study carried out this year for the creation of a central provident fund as by far the most important move on the labour front for years.

The report will have far-reaching effects on the well-being of workers, especially those about to retire.

The Government, however, holds a different view.

"I think the long service payment is a most important step forward," the secretary for Education and Manpower, Mr Ron Bridge, told *The Standard*. He said that Hongkong in



the past did not have any provision for long-serving employees who retired.

The long service payment, Mr Bridge said, serves to fill this gap.

"I am particularly pleased that it has the unanimous support of both the employers' and the employees' sides of the Labour Advisory Board," Mr Bridge said.

Plans by the Labour Department to expand the scope of the payment to cover those workers who retire because of ill health are underway.

The review is expected to be complete by February, Mr Bridge said.

Union members are also

tasting the fruit of success this year with the victory won in their campaign for the introduction of compulsory safety officers on construction sites.

Legislation was finally passed some months ago requiring contractors employing 200 workers or more to employ a safety officer, beginning in December next year.

While the provident fund study and the safety officer scheme have been the major achievements for the unions this year, there still remain a few tough battles ahead.

The most important is the continuing fight to get the central provident fund set

up in Hongkong.

The feasibility study carried out by the Education and Manpower Branch and released for "restricted consultation" toward the end of the year has been considered to be the main focus of work for the unionists in the year that lies ahead.

So far, most of the five bodies consulted by the Government have opposed the idea of setting up a centrally-administered provident scheme.

The unions plan to press hard in favour of the fund.

Apart from the central provident fund, a strong call for a safety council was made again by union members who were shocked by the disastrous explosion in the Cipel-Marco fur factory.

The explosion, which took place on October 8th, claimed 13 lives and injured 11 other people.

The use of a highly inflammable chemical is suspected to be the cause of the blast.

Most of the factory workers suffered severe burns. The Coroner's Court returned a verdict of misadventure on the deaths of the 13 victims.

The tragedy, believed to be the worst industrial accident in the history of Hongkong, sparked off once more the outcry for an independent safety council responsible for occupational health and industrial safety.

The call has been made several times before in the past but the source of funding for the council has repeatedly been a stumbling block.

It is, however, expected that the Government will solve the problem soon by setting up the council in the first half of next year.

It is likely that an additional levy of about \$20 will be imposed on registration fees to fund the council.

The tragedy has also caused a demand for stricter legislations governing the use of chemicals in factories.

Bowing to the public outcry, the Government has speeded up its work in this area and has promised that legislations governing the classification and labelling of chemicals will be in place by next year.

This year, the unions also claimed another victory with the enactment of legislations prohibiting and controlling the use of carcinogenic substances in Hongkong.