

Wage and payroll statistics for March 2020

Overall wage and payroll statistics

According to the figures released today (June 29) by the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), the average wage rate for all the selected industry sections surveyed, as measured by the wage index, increased by 2.2% in nominal terms in March 2020 over a year earlier.

About 56% of the companies reported increase in average wage rates in March 2020 compared with a year ago. 39% of the companies recorded decrease in average wage rates over the same period. The remaining 5% reported virtually no change in average wage rates.

After discounting the changes in consumer prices as measured by the Consumer Price Index (A), the overall average wage rate for all the selected industry sections surveyed decreased by 0.3% in real terms in March 2020 over a year earlier.

As for payroll, the index of payroll per person engaged for all the industry sections surveyed increased by 3.2% in nominal terms in the first quarter of 2020 over a year earlier.

After discounting the changes in consumer prices as measured by the Composite Consumer Price Index, the average payroll per person engaged increased by 1.2% in real terms in the first quarter of 2020 compared with a year earlier.

The wage rate includes basic wages and other regular and guaranteed allowances and bonuses. Payroll includes elements covered by wage rate as well as other irregular payments to workers such as discretionary bonuses and overtime allowances. The payroll statistics therefore tend to show relatively larger quarter-to-quarter changes, affected by the number of hours actually worked and the timing of payment of bonuses and back-pay.

Sectoral changes

For the nominal wage indices, year-on-year increases were recorded in all selected industry sections in March 2020, ranging from 1.1% to 3.2%.

For the real wage indices, year-on-year decreases ranging from 0.9% to 1.4% were recorded in the import/export, wholesale and retail trades section; accommodation and food service activities section and personal services section in March 2020. Yet, the manufacturing section remained virtually unchanged when compared with that in March 2019 while the other industry sections surveyed recorded year-on-year increases of 0.2% to 0.7%.

The year-on-year changes in the nominal and real wage indices for the selected industry sections from March 2019 to March 2020 are shown in Table 1.

As for the nominal indices of payroll per person engaged, a year-on-year increase of 10.2% was recorded for the social and personal services section in the first quarter of 2020 due to pay adjustments and issuance of back-pay in some subvented organisations. Besides, year-on-year increases ranging from 0.5% to 3.8% were also recorded in all the other industry sections surveyed, except the transportation, storage, postal and courier services section and accommodation and food service activities section where year-on-year decreases of 1.1% and 1.4% were recorded respectively.

For the real payroll indices, year-on-year increases ranging from 0.3% to 8.1% were recorded in the sewerage, waste management and remediation activities section; information and communications section; real estate activities section; professional and business services section and social and personal services section in the first quarter of 2020. The other industry sections surveyed recorded year-on-year decreases of 0.1% to 3.3%.

The year-on-year changes in the nominal and real indices of payroll per person engaged for selected industry sections from the first quarter of 2019 to the first quarter of 2020 are shown in Table 2. The quarterly changes in the seasonally adjusted nominal and real indices of payroll per person engaged between the first quarter of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020 are shown in Table 3.

Commentary

A Government spokesman noted that overall wages continued to increase in nominal terms in March 2020 over a year earlier, but the rate of increase decelerated further to the slowest in close to a decade as the threat of COVID-19 seriously disrupted a wide range of economic activities. After discounting for inflation, overall wages declined slightly in real terms over a year earlier.

Payroll per person engaged, which also covers discretionary bonuses and other irregular payments, saw a faster year-on-year increase in nominal terms in the first quarter of 2020 due to pay adjustments and issuance of back-pay in some subvented organisations, which were concentrated in the social and personal services sector. Indeed, payroll per person engaged in accommodation and food service activities, and transportation, storage, postal and courier services turned to decline, while those in most other major sectors saw decelerated growth.

The spokesman added that the latest figures indicated the situation up to March only and have yet to reflect the full impact of the pandemic. Looking ahead, while the local epidemic situation has abated, it will take time for local economic activities to return to normal. The external environment also remains difficult as the pandemic continues to weigh on the global economy. Thus, the earnings situation will still face downward

pressure in the near term. The Government will continue to monitor the developments closely.

Other information

Both wage indices and payroll indices are compiled quarterly based on the results of the Labour Earnings Survey (LES) conducted by the C&SD.

Wage statistics are conceptually different from the payroll statistics. Firstly, wage rate for an employee refers to the sum earned for his normal hours of work. It covers basic wages and other regular and guaranteed allowances and bonuses, but excludes earnings from overtime work and discretionary bonuses, which are however included in payroll per person engaged. Secondly, the payroll index of an industry is an indicator of the simple average payroll received per person engaged in the industry. Its movement is therefore affected by changes in wage rates, number of hours of work and occupational composition in the industry. In contrast, the wage index of an industry is devised to reflect the pure changes in wage rate, with the occupational composition between two successive statistical periods being kept unchanged. In other words, the wage index reflects the change in the price of labour. Thirdly, wage index only covers employees up to the supervisory level (i.e. not including managerial and professional employees), whereas payroll index covers employees at all levels and proprietors actively engaged in the work of the establishment. Because of these conceptual and enumeration differences between payroll and wage statistics, the movements in payroll indices and in wage indices do not necessarily match closely with each other.

It should also be noted that different consumer price indices are used for compiling the real indices of wage and payroll to take into account the differences in their respective occupation coverage. Specifically, the Composite Consumer Price Index, being an indicator of overall consumer prices, is taken as the price deflator for payroll of workers at all levels of the occupational hierarchy. The Consumer Price Index (A), being an indicator of consumer prices for the relatively low expenditure group, is taken as the price deflator for wages in respect of employees engaged in occupations up to the supervisory level.

Detailed breakdowns of the payroll and wage statistics are published in the "Quarterly Report of Wage and Payroll Statistics, March 2020". Users can download this publication free of charge from the website of the C&SD (www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp210.jsp?productCode=B1050009).

For enquiries on wage and payroll statistics, please contact the Wages and Labour Costs Statistics Section (1) of the C&SD (Tel: 2887 5550 or email: wage@censtatd.gov.hk).