

1896.

NEW ZEALAND.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR

(REPORT OF THE).

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

The SECRETARY, Department of Labour, to the Hon. the MINISTER of LABOUR.

SIR,—

Department of Labour, Wellington, 1st June, 1896.

I have the honour to present herewith the fifth annual report of this department. It covers the late financial year—viz., from the 1st April, 1895, to the 31st March, 1896. It is not brought up to the present date, as some time has necessarily been taken up in compiling returns into statistical tables.

I have, &c.,

The Hon. R. J. Seddon, Minister of Labour.

EDWARD TREGEAR, Secretary.

LABOUR.

In my last report, covering the year 1894–95, I expressed the opinion that, despite the disastrous effects of depression during the last year or two, there was a strong tendency to improvement in trade and to a firmer market for labour. That upward tendency has been well sustained. There can be no doubt that, owing to many different causes, the outlook at the beginning of 1896 shows a marked improvement on that of the same season last year. The great advance in the price of wool has gladdened the hearts and helped towards refilling the pockets of stock-breeders and runholders. The splendid harvest, in which fine weather for cutting crowned a bounteous yield and increased area of crop, had the same inspiring effect upon the agriculturist as the buoyant wool-market had upon his pastoral brother. The rise in the price of products set free in some degree the tide of monetary circulation, stimulating the skilled trades, especially the building trade, to renewed activity. Even the feeling of hopefulness is no slight factor towards national prosperity, encouraging as it does an outlay of capital which would otherwise lie dormant and frozen up.

Unlike the grain-yield, the grass-seed harvest was uneven. At Gisborne it was the best season ever known; at Pahiatua it was a failure. The timber trade has been good. In Greymouth the sawmills are cutting for the South African market. Woollen mills are in full swing, some of them employing large staffs of hands, and extensive alterations are being made in premises in order to cope with new business. The importance and extent of our mineral deposits, and the increase in the output of gold from our mines, attracted the attention of investors in other parts of the world; and, occurring just at the time when enterprise in South Africa was momentarily paralysed through political events, a stream of capital has flowed, and is flowing, into New Zealand, which promises to give the great mineral wealth of the colony a chance to be prospected and developed such as it has never before possessed. These circumstances, springing some from external and some from internal sources, have commingled into a current of national activity whose present potency and future promise exceed anything one would have ventured to predict at this time last year.

There have been during the year “unemployed” agitations at various centres of commercial life within the colony. Concerning the cause of these agitations, mention will be made at greater length further on. Some have been the outcome of pressure on honest industrious men in want of work; others have been the expression of ideas by men not so industrious with their hands as with their tongues; and they all have been the fruit of changing social relations, not at all to be understood by most and only half understood by an intelligent few. That this is the case it is only necessary to look round outside New Zealand to prove. In every civilised country there is to be found the same pressure against the means of subsistence, the same discontent with things as they are, and the same helpless feeling-out in every direction for new openings to which the superabundant labour of growing populations may apply itself. It is almost certain that during the coming year labour will become in this colony more sure of employment, and it is to be hoped that the next annual report of this department will show by the decrease in the number of men assisted that the necessities of the masses have been less, and the general prosperity greater, than the figures in the present document indicate.