

## THE SHOPS AND SHOP-ASSISTANTS ACT.

These Acts appear to be working well all over the country. There have been few prosecutions necessary compared with those of former years, and some of these have been occasioned by the meaning of certain sections not being clear to the ordinary reader.

The portion of the Acts most needing amendment is that dealing with small shopkeepers being allowed to keep half-holiday on different days of the week. That this provision of the law gives the Inspectors continuous and increasing work is a matter that could be met by a small increase of the official staff; but it creates much irritation among shopkeepers. Letters are frequently received by the officials denouncing certain tradesmen for selling goods on the half-holiday, while the supposed offenders are within their rights under the present laws. The number of persons taking advantage of the eccentric half-holiday is very few, considering the irritation they set up, or the doubtful gain to themselves. In Dunedin, for instance, out of 150 shopkeepers privileged to open their establishments on the regular half-holiday only thirty take advantage of it; and should these be compelled to fall into rank with the majority the loss to themselves or inconvenience to the public would be of small moment compared to the work they give Inspectors and the vexation they cause to other men in a similar line of business. The case for fruiterers, confectioners, restaurant-keepers, &c., is, of course, on a different footing.

That perfect legislation has been arrived at in regard to those sections of the Shops Acts dealing with banks and offices cannot be conceded. The machinery is not provided by law to enable the Inspectors to carry out the Act thoroughly. A simple amendment to the effect that in each office a time-book must be kept, signed by the manager every day, and open to the Inspector of Factories' perusal, would do much to meet the difficulty. In this book each officer should be required to sign his name and the precise time at which he arrives in the morning and leaves off his work in the afternoon or night. Time-books of this character are kept in every branch of the Government service. If such book had to be produced, and its correctness (if necessary) sworn to in Court, such a measure would do much to check the parsimonious and cruel overwork of clerks in offices and banks. There is no reason why records of time worked, wages paid, &c., should be demanded under the law from owners of manufactories while a simple time-book may not be asked for from employers of clerical labour. Such a book, if provided, should have a summary showing each month the total number of hours worked by each officer.

## HOURS OF LABOUR IN FACTORIES AND SHOPS.

It is worthy of consideration on the part of the Government whether the whole principle on which the Factories and Shops Acts is sustained should not be subject to re-examination. This principle appears to have been that male workers should have full liberty to work what hours they please, or be worked whatever hours their employers please, because such males, possessing voting-power as citizens, could at any time complain to Parliament, through the member for their district, if oppression was practised on them. Women and lads, on the other hand, weaker in body, and without political existence, had to be guarded by special legislation from being worked too long hours, or in surroundings tending to injure their health or morality. This position may have been a proper one some years ago, but changing political conditions have affected the usefulness of the legislative enactments, or, rather, have destroyed the equilibrium of the sex-protecting portions. Women in this colony now enjoy the same political rights as men, and some of the legal provisions intended for their protection are failing to protect, and are becoming instruments of annoyance and distress. Both in factories and shops, wherever men and women are employed together, as in a woollen-mill, or are equally capable, as for serving at a shop-counter, the longer hours a man is allowed to work give him a strong preference in an employer's eyes, and handicap the woman out of her occupation or into accepting a far lower rate of pay.

It is much to be feared that in many cases the advantages bestowed on shop-assistants in the half-holiday are neutralised by shops being kept open much longer on week-days than they were formerly. The result is that, taking the week through, more hours are worked than before the passing of the Act, and, although the half-holiday is observed, much of its good effect is done away with. This, again, arises from there being no limit to the hours of working for men as for women. There can be no reason why, since a woman is prohibited from working too long hours, similar protection should not be given to a man. In many cases men are as feeble constitutionally as women, although they may be physically stronger in the direction of mere *thew and muscle*.

Even in the matter of overtime alone, some notice of the uneven condition between the sexes is deserved. If a woman works overtime she has not only to be paid for it, but a minimum wage is fixed, and the employer is liable to suffer for a breach of the law if such wage is not paid. The man, on the contrary, may be worked not only outrageously long hours at his ordinary day's work, but kept on at overtime, without pay, till either his strength or his patience is exhausted. If it be urged that unionism is the true preventive of such excess, it appears probable that unionism is credited with much more universal and protective guardianship than it exerts over the men workers of the colony at present. If the argument is good that a minimum overtime wage is just for a worker, then it applies to a man as well as a woman; principles of this kind are not affected by sex-difference.

If a certain margin of allowance be granted for sudden pressure of business, or in certain lines of business, or at stated times of periodic activity (as at stocktaking season) the ordinary hours of labour in shop or factory could be regulated by law for both sexes, and the scandal would be done away with which now shows one man doing the work of two, either willingly or by compulsion, while another man stands idly by.

If the passing of an Eight Hours Bill would meet the case many would be glad to see such an Act on the statute-book. Unfortunately, this would not fully master the situation, as there is the employer also to be considered. In parts of some of our colonial towns there are whole rows of