

that added payment (if any) is made. There are doubtless crises in every business when it would be seriously crippled if some expansion of the hours of labour were not permitted, but it is doubtful exceedingly whether the limit now allowed by the Factories Act should not be considerably contracted. I recommend that the overtime-limit be reduced, and the permission to work on half-holiday be rescinded altogether. The factory half-holiday should be regarded as a sacred thing. That it is not so at present is proved by the fact that, in spite of all discouragement by the department, in Christchurch alone 1,666 extra hours were worked on the half-holiday. This revoking of permission to work on the half-holiday should not apply to firms dealing with repairs to steamers or other work of urgent necessity.

ACCIDENTS.

I regret to say that during the year, in spite of careful supervision, 144 accidents have occurred to workpeople engaged in industrial pursuits. Some of these have been of the slightest character, and it will be difficult to entirely prevent such mishaps occurring among the hundreds of powerful and intricate machines that are tended by our workmen and workwomen. One accident, however, demands special attention, as it involves a question of principle. An unfortunate young man subject to epileptic fits was employed in a factory, and, falling (during a fit) into a vat of hot water, received injuries that caused his death within a few hours. It becomes a matter of doubt whether some responsibility should not be cast upon an employer as to the mental and physical condition of the workmen he engages. It appears to be a sheer absurdity to say that before a factory-owner employs a man he should require a certificate of health or sanity. On the other hand, it may well be urged that an employer who allows a lunatic, a weak-minded person, or an epileptic to work among machinery, or in positions where such a person may endanger his own life or the lives of other workmen (who have no voice in his engagement), is guilty of conduct little short of crime. In the particular case in question there has been no imputation of either callousness or carelessness on the part of the employer. He allowed the deceased (who could get no work elsewhere, and whose family circumstances were unfortunate) to be employed in his establishment, but with an unhappy and fatal result. Such a case shows the necessity for the introduction of a Bill on the lines of the English Workmen's Compensation Act; but it also shows that, for the sake of other workmen, discretion in the selection of doubtful employes should be rendered legally imperative.

EMPLOYERS' LIABILITY ACT.

Complaints are still rife as to illegal deductions being made from the wages of workmen under the pretence of a so-called "accident-insurance scheme." These complaints have generally nothing to do with private benefit societies, some of the latter being of distinct advantage, and acquiesced in by the workpeople interested. The objections refer to the arbitrary deduction of wages without consultation of the wishes of employes, and without consideration whether the workman is already a member of friendly or benefit societies. If he is such a member the mulct of wages may compel him to resign and forfeit advantages, as he probably will be unable to keep up too many premium calls on his small income. Such insurance, even if entered into with a reputable insurance company, is a direct incentive to carelessness in employers as to the life and limb of their workpeople. It has always been held that to insure another person without his consent is morally wrong, and has a criminal tendency, distinctly visible in this case, as the workman is made by his forced contribution to help to pay beforehand the fine to be levied on a careless employer for the said workman's death. As it is only when an employer is careless of life of his employes that he is liable to damages for accident under our present Liability Act, it will be seen that getting an insurance company to pay such damages, and making the workmen pay the premiums therefor, is evasion of a particularly malignant character. If legislation is not introduced and passed, all that can be done is for some workman to bring actions for all back moneys thus illegally detained, and so to vindicate the Workmen's Wages Act and other statutes intended for the protection of labour.

CONFERENCE.

A conference of Factory Inspectors met for the discussion of the labour-laws and for the purpose of making suggestions concerning their administration. As these Inspectors have now for seven years dealt with the administration of these laws, they have learnt at which points friction is induced, and their opinions as to the portions necessitating amendment deserve grave consideration. In spite of the animadversions of a small section who would prefer the absence of all law or restraints between themselves and their employes, the general consensus of opinion is that the labour-laws have been of inestimable benefit to the working-classes, that they have been no clog on legitimate commercial expansion, and that their administration has been marked by fearless honesty and good sense on the part of the men to whom the Government intrusted the local carrying-out of the statutes. There is little friction now in regard to the Factories Act, Shop Act, Servants' Registry, &c., but in regard to the machinery of the Acts the conference has made certain recommendations, among which the following are noteworthy:—

"Factories Act, 1894."

That slaughterhouses be brought under the Act, on account of the employment at present therein of boys for very long hours, and some of these boys being under fourteen years of age.

That persons intending to erect a building as a factory should first deposit plan with Inspector for approval. If this is not done the Inspector has either to register a place he considers unsuitable or cause expense by requiring (sometimes) considerable alterations.

That the Inspector should not have to prove "wilful" obstruction in the execution of his duty, as in the face of acute counsel for the defendant proof of obstruction being "wilful" is almost impossible to obtain.