

progressive improvement so much desired. From the Commission's records it is estimated that the loading and discharging of overseas vessels under the co-operative contracting system has resulted in an average saving of three days per ship.

WORKING EXTENDED HOURS.

The waterside workers answered the call to work longer hours each day to such an extent that responsible interests in the industry expressed their concern, and proposed alternatives with a view to avoiding the possible detrimental physical effect on the men, who have on a number of occasions worked a regular span of thirteen hours consecutively every day for more than a week at a time.

In an effort to remedy this evil the Commission introduced a relief system of working which provided for continuous work on ships by the employment of fresh gangs from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. the following morning. While this did not shorten the hours worked by the day gangs, it did shorten the number of days men worked on extended hours, and so minimized fatigue, also reducing the time in port of the vessels concerned.

This system operated only in special cases of urgency such as when a vessel was found to be falling behind her schedule sailing-time. It was felt by the Government, however, that the shipping outlook necessitated still further efforts being made to expedite despatch of vessels, and a conference of all parties directly interested was called to consider what further steps were necessary to achieve that objective. The Conference reached a unanimous agreement on several proposals, the most important having reference to "round the clock" working, referred to hereunder.

WORKING ROUND THE CLOCK.

The Conference referred to this as shift-work. The term, however, does not correctly describe what was meant, as shift-work can only apply where the work to be performed is reasonably continuous. However, the term will be used in the sense in which it was accepted by the Conference.

To those who have insufficient knowledge of the industry, there appears to be no earthly reason why the process of loading and discharging of ships should not go on continuously. If there was a reasonable continuity of shipping, the problem would be simplified. It is, however, complicated by the irregularity of the arrival of shipping characteristic of the industry, which has been aggravated by conditions arising out of the war. This irregularity necessitates a varying labour demand, every man being wanted at the same time in busy periods, while a substantial number being surplus at slack times, this ebb and flow of labour requirements is too erratic to provide that degree of permanency of work sufficient to arrange for a satisfactory shift-work system. If sufficient men were engaged in order to fulfil maximum requirements by night as well as by day during busy periods, several hundred more men would be required at the ports of Wellington and Auckland alone, which would add to the normal number of idle men during slack periods, and if such additional men became a charge on the industry then payment for idle time might well exceed, on occasions, payment for working-time, or, put in another way, if working-time was loaded with the cost of idle time, then hourly rates would be considerably higher than at present; or to guarantee an adequate weekly income to which every man is entitled, a very heavy levy would have to be imposed on the industry for maintenance of the men during slack periods.

Apart from the excessive costs of any of the foregoing arrangements, there would be a wastage of labour-power at a time when the conservation of man-power is vital, and so would be rightfully condemned by all right-thinking citizens. If it were possible to provide some subsidiary essential employment during slack periods to which men could be transferred without unnecessary formality, then there would be no difficulty in arranging regular shifts, for additional men could be engaged with a knowledge that, where the industry did not provide sufficient work or earnings, the subsidiary employment would fulfil those requirements without any potential waste of labour-power. It has also been contended without any reservation that when a ship arrives, cargo-working operations should continue unceasingly. This, however, is not always practicable, as it is impossible to clear the ship's cargo out of the sheds as rapidly as it can be discharged from the ship, and even under extended-hours system of working with nine hours' cessation of work every twenty-four hours, congestion of cargo in wharf sheds frequently occurs, and ships have had to be removed to three different berths and store cargo in nine sheds before being able to quit their cargoes, so obviously any attempt to work with full gangs and without a break in such circumstances would accentuate the problems arising from congestion, particularly so at the week-ends and holidays, when no delivery of cargo is taken by the scores of consignees to whom it belongs.

Another reason why it is unnecessary to work continuously at some ships is the need for repairs to either the machinery, hull, or the docking of the vessels for cleaning and painting. If such vessels have to wait their turn for the dock or require two or three weeks to complete repairs, the only justification for working unceasingly at cargo operations would be to release labour for other vessels when a shortage of workers was anticipated.

These are only a few of the reasons which complicate the working of straight-out shifts, some of which can be overcome in time. It is significant, however, that when agreement had been made for round-the-clock working, some shipowners' representatives have shown reluctance to avail themselves of same when men have been available and willing to perform the work.

With the anticipated reduction in the number of ships arriving in the Dominion, it may be found that a more flexible system of working will fulfil requirements more efficiently and economically than the semi-rigid shift system.

The Commission is of the opinion that the system of working extended hours, with arrangements for relief gangs wherever it is necessary to work round the clock, will prove most satisfactory.