

such a purpose be made. Strong desire to make the economic conditions of shopkeepers and shop-assistants more easy and to give evening hours for recreation, mental improvement, and domestic comfort to thousands whose time is now unreasonably requisitioned should not blind us to the injustice (if it exists) of pressing with undue stringency upon the owners of small establishments struggling hard for a living. We may recognise that the ideal condition of employment is one in which every man and woman has at least the evening hours for purposes of leisure; but having, as practical persons, to take into consideration the present framework and motive power of social life, it must be acknowledged that without some fundamental and universal change these conditions cannot be obtained. It is impossible that the sailor, the engine-driver, the restaurant-keeper, the waiter, the actor, the doctor, the policeman, the night-watchman, should be made to leave off work at 6 p.m. So also it appears that in some trades latitude should be given to the hours of closing shops which are a convenience to their local public and an honest livelihood for their occupiers. While strict statutory regulation should govern the hours of all shop-assistants, it would probably be the only method approaching fairness to allow the time of closing to be settled within each trade by the shopkeepers themselves. The balance to be sought is that between a man's energy and his highest advantage. If it is considered desirable to abridge the power of the shopkeeper to keep open all night (as he does in some parts of the world), then it would be better for the shopkeepers by a majority vote to govern the hours of their trade than for the Government by statutory interference to paralyse business in certain occupations, unless it be settled beyond all possibility of doubt that compulsory closing by Act is necessary for the health and comfort of the workers and the general public.

I may add that the institution of electric trams has considerably affected suburban business, as, if outlying shops are closed at 6 p.m., the daylight trade is deflected to the large shops in the main streets, which can be reached by a penny fare, and where large choice of goods and cheap bargain-sales handicap the small trader.

HOUSING OF WORKERS.

I beg again to emphasize the tenor of the remarks made by me last year in a memorandum presented to Parliament, and entitled "High Wages and their Exploitation." The subject grows hourly to greater importance. Its bearing, particularly on organized labour, in connection with the rents demanded in cities is of a very serious nature. In order to procure statistical data for this branch of the subject, circulars were sent out to workers' unions all over the colony, and sufficient response has been made to enable valuable conclusions to be arrived at (see schedule, page 99, of this report).* It may be noted that considerable difference exists between the rates of rent in cities and in rural districts, the town-dweller having a far heavier levy on his resources than the agricultural labourer or rural artisan. To counterbalance this, the town-dweller draws a higher wage, but—and I ask for special notice for this point—in no fair ratio; the higher wage is no real equivalent for the increased outlay. A large factor in the town-worker's expenses does not show in his direct rent-bill. While the rural worker pays less rent, he in almost every case either grows his own vegetables and fruit, or could do so if he chose, while in town the fruit and vegetables have had a considerable addition to their cost made by being sold in heavily rented shops. This is true, of course, also of other things besides fruit and vegetables. The groceries, the meat, the bread, the garments, the boots, are all heightened in price to the consumer indirectly by excessive rents, so the heavy direct rent of the worker's house is supplemented by the universal extra rent levied through his supplies. It is therefore no wonder that under this pressure of direct and indirect rent-charges the cost of living increases day by day, and the wages of the worker have less and less purchasing-power. The slight advance in workers' wages has kept, I repeat, no fair ratio with the advance of the price of the necessaries of life. Mr. Coghlan, the Government Statistician of New South Wales, affirms that wages in New Zealand increased 8½ per cent. in fifteen years. As house-rent in the cities has increased at least 30 per cent., and many of the necessaries of life from 10 per cent. to 50 per cent. in that time, the reason for what employers stigmatize as "the incessant demand for higher wages" becomes not only to be understood but to be excused.

If, as is sometimes alleged, the cost of house-rent had risen on account of the higher price of timber and increased wages paid in the building trades, such rise in rent would have a reasonable basis. Nine out of ten, however, of the houses (especially in Wellington) were built before

* Generally the return shows that the rents are in ratio to earnings—in Auckland, 28 per cent.; in Wellington, 33 per cent.; in Christchurch, 25 per cent.; in Dunedin, 25 per cent.; in Gisborne, 27 per cent.; in Napier, 23 per cent.; in Wanganui, 24 per cent.; in Nelson, 26 per cent.