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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

ONCE more a day has been made memorable in the history of Dunedin by a labour demonstration, SATURDAY. Saturday was the chosen season, and the form which the demonstration took was that of a procession, terminating in a meeting. The unions mustered strong, and their line was imposing in its length—imposing also in the thoroughly respectable appearance of the men and the orderliness and earnestness of their demeanour. If they are pursuing a chimera, the manner in which they are doing so, so far as it meets the eye, makes the fact that they are wasting their time and efforts, and injuring their own best interests many times more lamentable. The line of march was from the triangle to the north end of the town, whence a return was made through the principal streets—a brass band and a knot of pipers heading the array, and relieving each other in discoursing sweet sounds. The site of the meeting was the space lately covered by the gardens of the Exhibition, and where the central kiosk, which still remains standing, served as a platform. As to the speeches, they were very fervent and very confident, and they were listened to with wrapped and noiseless attention by a crowded audience, who seemed in the fullest sympathy with the speakers. The chief subject dealt with was the dismissal by the Railway Commissioners of four prominent members of the Railway Servants' Association for the part taken by them in a meeting of their Association held at Christchurch on September 3. This was denounced especially as an infringement of the right of free speech, and, explained as it was by the speakers, it certainly assumed a very evil appearance. The position occupied generally by the Railway Commissioners was also discussed and objected to as subjecting the railways directly to the control of the Legislative Council. It was, in fact, made clear that, if the people, as represented at least by the Dunedin unions, succeed in returning a majority at the approaching elections, short work will be made of the Commissioners. It was not, however, the Commissioners alone that came in for the reproof of the speakers. One of them, for example, declared that the unions were unjustly opposed by four "P's," namely the Parliament, the Police, the Press and the Pulpit. With the Parliament, we have nothing to do—it may be taken as fair game, if indeed, such a moribund quarry is considered worth an arrow. Five of its members alone were afterwards singled out for a resolution of thanks, which it is charitable to hope that even so miserable a remnant may deserve. The police, we believe were vainly accused, their names perhaps being introduced more for the sake of alliteration than for anything else. But they do not appear to have been the aggressors in any case since the movement commenced. Towards the Press, also, the speakers seemed to us somewhat unfair. Their assumption, in fact, appeared to be that all who were not pronouncedly for them were against them, and they hardly made allowance enough for doubt and hesitation in what is really a very difficult question. The asserted opposition of the pulpit, meantime, gave rise to rather an amusing incident. One of the speakers boldly, and withal as it proved rashly, attacked a statement that he had heard a certain minister make on a recent occasion, alluding with derision and indignation to a contrast drawn between the condition of labour in the middle ages and that less favourably occupied by it to-day. He ended by challenging the minister whom he said he saw present to come forward and meet his argument if he dared. And the minister did dare. He behaved with decided pluck, and deserves credit for his action. He came on the platform, faced the unsympathetic crowd, gave them Professor Thorold Rogers, a silence-producing name, as his authority, with the title of the Professor's book, where it was to be purchased and its price. He also took the opportunity of protesting against boycotting, and recommended to the particular attention of the unions, as a substitute for the end they now had in view, the settlement of the land of the colony. The boycott, nevertheless, retains its position of esteem in the minds and hearts of the speakers. One of them declared that, so long as he was good for anything, he would adhere to it as his

dearest right. Another proclaimed it a "heaven-sent privilege," although, he said, when first he heard of it, he had not been inclined to look upon it with any particular respect. And did we, indeed, ourselves anticipate in those days when, at the back of God-speed below remote, dismal, Ballinrobe, the system was assuming its modern shape, and all the world outside Ireland, as well as some share of the world within the island's limits, were loud in condemnation of it that we should ever hear the boycott held up to applause and loudly applauded as a blessed institution by a crowd of our own sober and respectable citizens of Dunedin?—for let us not suppose the unions are anything else in either appearance or conduct. But one touch of nature makes the whole world kin, and the peasant who struggles for his rights on the banks of Lough Mask is hailed as a celestial leader by the antipodean artisan who feels himself in a similar plight. An expression of relationship and sympathy which fell less welcome on our ears was that in which the speaker alluded to spoke of Russian Nihilists and German Socialists as brothers with him in the same cause, and excused by their different circumstances for the different methods employed by them. We would fain believe that the speaker was carried away by the heat of speaking, and that not even in Russia would he take part, as he certainly implied he would, in, at least, the methods of the Nihilists. On the whole, nevertheless, the speeches were moderate and good. They were calculated also to give a high idea of the intellectual standing of the Dunedin artisan. Like the appearance and conduct of the union men, they left the impression that if they were connected with a vain effort to promote an unworthy or weak movement, there was much cause to regret the fact. To see men in every way fitted to work out fine and beneficial ends engaged in a useless and wasteful struggle must be a melancholy sight. The true meaning of this memorable Saturday, therefore, remains to be determined by the final issue.

AS to the accusation brought against the Press at the meeting in Dunedin on Saturday, of being AN UNFAIR ACCUSATION. inimical to the existing labour agitation, and one of the speakers on the occasion made express mention of the religious Press,—so far as we ourselves are concerned, it was unjust. With the objects of the labour unions, that is so far as they are the advancement of the working classes, the redress of grievances from which they suffer, or the amelioration of their position, we are in sympathy. But we think it is open to us, or, indeed, incumbent on us, to be fully assured as to the nature of the measures taken and their relation towards the ends sought, before we give them our advocacy. This is all the more incumbent on us, because, as we are our existence almost entirely to the support given us by workingmen, any slip on our part, or any false step by which we might mislead them, would be more than ordinarily culpable. What we doubt, therefore, is not that the working-man's position is capable of improvement, or that, even as he is situated in New Zealand, and immeasurably better off than he is at Home, his condition, to keep pace with the progress of the age, does not still need amendment. We are convinced for example, that he may legitimately claim such a shortening of his hours of labour as may be necessary to prevent his earnings from being lessened by the employment of machinery. He has also in our opinion a right to claim a fair share of the profits that his labour contributes to secure—a claim already acknowledged in many instances where the system of profit-sharing has with much success been introduced, and we acknowledge him entitled in every way to demand that he may so be placed as to satisfy the wants, and keep on the level to which modern civilisation has led him, and which must necessarily become respectively more numerous and higher as time goes by. If, for instance, the artisan of the middle ages was, as certainly was the case, better off than the artisan of the day is, his earnings were less but his wants were fewer. The advance of civilisation and culture, in which, whether he will or no, the working man must have his part, creates wants, and he has a right to demand that he may be so placed as to provide for them. Still we argue that it is open to us to doubt as to whether the working men are wise in persevering in a movement that, to all appearances, must result in hindering progress and throwing back the standing of the colony. That they will be finally prevented from attaining their object we do not believe. What we witnessed on