

(7.) There should be some legislation to regulate fines which can be inflicted upon employés. These are sometimes so arbitrary and inevitable as seriously to curtail the income of the mulcted person.

The sum received in fees from the factories during the year was £1,306 8s. 9d., but, as this has been paid into the Consolidated Fund, it does not lighten the expenses of the Department of Labour, from whose vote the salaries, travelling-allowances, &c., of Inspectors are taken.

“THE SHOPS AND SHOP-ASSISTANTS ACT, 1892.”

This Act of last session came into force on the 11th day of October, 1892. Its administration was placed in the hands of the Inspectors of Factories.

There was at first some difficulty in getting the provisions of the Act enforced. The general body of employers seemed unaware of the exact position in which they stood towards the law, much alteration having befallen the Bill in its progress through the two branches of the Legislative Assembly. Another and by far the most important reason was the difficulty of reconciling conflicting interests in town and country, or between localities in the same town, and between different trades. There seemed to be a consensus of opinion that a general half-holiday was desirable, and especially was this the case in large establishments, many of which employed, besides their shop-assistants, workers in trades and handicrafts, whose holidays were already fixed by statute and under the supervision of Inspectors of Factories. The employers held public meetings in which they not only attempted to meet the Act in a generous manner, but—especially in Dunedin and Christchurch—they showed an enthusiasm which was of a most unselfish character. The employés themselves could not have made greater efforts for this purpose than were made by some employers. The question as to the day of the week caused the most argument, but differences of opinion as to the day were forced down by the will of the majority almost everywhere, and a half-holiday established. Its duration was of the briefest character. In some places it lasted longer than in others; but, so far as a common half-day being observed as a holiday in the chief towns, it was found to be, on the voluntary system, impracticable. Suburbs lying close to the cities wished to observe a different day from the centre, and the balance of trade was upset. Shops employing only one assistant, or none beside the proprietors, were kept open in the endeavour to catch the business of the closed establishments; then shops slightly larger began to keep open, and so on, until the firms employing large numbers of shop-assistants were forced, against their more generous instincts, to yield to trade-competition through fear of loss. It thus became evident that unless a general shop-closing Act became law it was impossible that private wishes could bring about the desired result. The vicious system of giving the half-holiday in detail then obtained favour, and at present this rule of one assistant being let off duty one day, and another on some other day, is in general vogue, although there are exceptions among a few leading firms. In country towns the half-holiday on a fixed day is very generally observed; in many cases such half-holidays had been in force before the passing of the Act.

That the holiday should be given in detail must be regarded as mischievous for several reasons. If general closing of shops and trading establishments could be enforced by law, it would be possible for the united efforts of those released from labour to promote healthy sports, drills, picnic excursions, yachting, and public meetings of all kinds. This was shown to be not only likely, but existent in fact during the short time in which the general holiday in large towns lasted; and the spectacle of many hundreds of people enjoying themselves and recuperating their energies during a few hours of each week had a very encouraging effect, while the drift into the holiday by detail renders the intention of the Act almost nugatory. A solitary individual set free to roam about and fill up his or her time is not an object of cheerfulness, nor even of usefulness. A still stronger reason from an administrative point of view is the great difficulty of enforcing the Act. For an Inspector to keep lists of all the shop-assistants in a large town, they having their holidays on different days, is a heavy task. It is not only an incessant worry to the Inspector, but it is by no means conducive to public morality, for there is almost certainly much paltering with truth on the part of those questioned as to the time when the weekly half-holiday is taken. It is reasonable that an employer should desire, especially in busy seasons, to obtain all the service he can from his assistant, and it is also most natural that an assistant who has not received his holiday should deny the fact to the Inspector if affirmation should mean the infliction of a fine upon his employer, and, thence, probable dismissal for himself. I believe that every effort is now used by Inspectors (short of absolute annoyance) to see that shop-assistants get their holiday; but the present principle is bad, and the lists of off-days can never be thoroughly checked under the Act of 1892 without a system of inspection so close and rigid as to be hateful to free citizens who are employers of labour, and most of whom, I feel convinced, have the welfare of their workpeople at heart. The numerous mechanical inventions of our century have abolished the necessity for long hours of labour, while the growth of education among the labouring-classes intensifies their desire for hours of relaxation and culture, such as the illiterate workers of past generations could not have put to profitable use.

*Suggestions for Amendment.*—I think that the need for a general compulsory half-holiday is now widely admitted. If, however, the present Act be not superseded, it should at all events be added to in the following particulars: There should be a clause inserted enforcing the same sanitary precautions as in the Factories Act in regard to air-space, closets, &c. A provision should limit the hours during which females and young persons could be made to work on any one day, as the present section of the Act only limits the hours per week, and allows far too long a period of employment at one time without rest. There should also be a clause regulating the age at which children might be employed, and causing those under sixteen years of age to hold certificates of permission from the Inspector.

It would be of advantage should certain trades be exempt from ordinary rule, under conditions—notably fruiterers, confectioners, &c.