

WILFRED HIGGINBOTTOM, Ironmonger, Riddiford Street, Newtown, examined. (No. 2.)

7. *The Chairman.*] Are you a member of the Shopkeepers' Association?—Yes.

8. Will you make a statement?—Yes, sir. In the first place, let me say that Newtown is differently situated from the city, to a certain extent. It is essentially a working-man population that we have there. The men begin to migrate to the city at 7 o'clock—some a little earlier; but at 7 there is a continual stream going down into the city to work. Some of these men do not leave the city till 5, half past 5, and 6 o'clock. It is naturally impossible for them to do their business then, and some of them have only got half an hour during certain portions of the year for lunch. They have no time, unless they come with a rush at night. I will guarantee that five-sixths of the working-people of Newtown are opposed to the 6 o'clock closing movement for that simple reason—that they have no time to do their shopping. We are not supposed to open in the morning till 8. I have had to stop serving any customer who would have bought a hammer or a chisel, or something else with which he would want to work, because the law says, "You shall not open before 8 o'clock." These men go into the city, and, instead of the shopkeepers at Newtown being supported by their own population, this trade is absolutely driven into the hands of the big men in the city. There is no doubt about it, the 6 o'clock closing is going to create a monopoly in the shopkeeping business. The smaller man—the man who cannot possibly stand—will have to go, while the big man will remain; and then, when the smaller man is out of the way, the big man will make the people pay the piper. I could give this Committee the names of gentlemen who were in the habit of coming into my shop to do business after 6 at night; but since early closing has been in force—that is, during the last eight weeks—these gentlemen have never been in my shop, except one night last week, when they came just after 6 and gave me an order to get ready for them at 8 o'clock the next morning. That trade has entirely gone from me, with the exception of that one case. I think that if this Committee want to foster labour they should give the labourer, at any rate, time in which he can do his business. If Parliament wants to shut up the small shops, there is no doubt this is a very effective way of doing it. With reference to the gentlemen who are now very anxious that 6 o'clock closing should be in operation, I may tell you that for some two or three years I lived near to one of them, and I suppose you could have bought goods from him if you had gone up to 12 at night, because I believe he would have got up to serve you. I do not blame him; he was making his position, and I am making mine. I want to be able to live, and I want my son after me to be able to get a living. I went to Newtown with the idea of building up a trade. It took me some time to build it up, and just as I am beginning to find my feet 6 o'clock closing comes along. The question with me is this, as regards my own business: How long will two of us be employed? because if the law is not altered it is certain one of us will have to go out of the business. I cannot afford to go on for long in the way I have been going on during the last eight weeks. I spent a large sum of money in providing good business premises, and these are practically, as far as business is concerned, fully 25 per cent. less value to me than they were before.

EDGAR JONES, Vice-President of the Shopkeepers' Association, examined. (No. 3.)

9. *The Chairman.*] What is your calling?—Tailor.

10. Will you proceed, please?—At one of the shops which we have, through closing at 6 o'clock, the trade has gone down about 15 per cent. There is only the manager employed in the shop after that hour. As vice-president of the association, I have found on going through the town that during the last three or four months 6 o'clock closing has affected the smaller shopkeepers to a very great extent. At one shop at which I called a week or two ago—a small draper's shop in town; I will not mention names—the week's takings amounted to £12 11s. 5d., while for the same week in the previous year the takings were £48 15s. Of course, they did not say that the shrinkage had all occurred through the 6 o'clock closing. A lot of that large reduction was due to slackness of trade, because trade is not so good this year as it was last. I am speaking of the retail trade. You can easily understand that the heavy reduction from £48 to £12 means the difference between profit and loss, and if this state of things continues the person in question will have to close his business. Another tradesman I went to has two shops, and he said the result of 6 o'clock closing was a difference of 60 per cent. in his takings. The person I refer to is Mr. Whittaker, of Whittaker Bros., who keeps a bookseller's shop in Cuba Street. He says that the trade there is done at night; that their takings have gone down over 60 per cent., and consequently he has given notice to leave the shop, because he says it will be three or four months before the law can be altered, and he cannot stand the loss in the meantime. Up Newtown way, they tell us, four-fifths of the people resident there are working-men; it is 6 o'clock before they get home; they are unable to purchase before 6 o'clock, and if 6 o'clock closing is enforced it means absolute ruin to the shopkeepers in that part of the town. I find from going through the town that the operation of the 6 o'clock closing clause is good for the larger shops, but is very detrimental to the smaller shops in Wellington. We have taken a tally of the number of shops in town. It is 907, and I think out of this number there are about two hundred shops that have always closed at 6. The strongest supporters of the present 6 o'clock closing arrangement—that is, among the employers—kept open till 10 or 11 when they first started in business themselves. I know this, because I have been in Wellington some twenty-six years. You first of all start with a small capital, and you have to make every post a winning-post. When your business increases and gets larger you close at 6. In Wellington there are about two hundred shopkeepers who close at 6, and who will do so whether the Act is in force or not.

11. *Mr. Tanner.*] Did they always close at 6 from the time they started?—No. I remember some years ago, in Tory Street, some hundred shop-assistants went along with a band playing, in order to compel a shopkeeper to close at 6 o'clock. That shopkeeper is at present, I believe, one of the strongest supporters of 6 o'clock closing. At that time he kept open till 10 or 11; he was just starting then.