

[NOTE.—This evidence was omitted from the original paper. It is now inserted in its proper place.]

FRIDAY, 9TH AUGUST, 1907.

WILLIAM HENRY WESTBROOKE examined. (A.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What are you?—Secretary of the Wellington Trades and Labour Council. I am more particularly concerned, on behalf of the Council, as to the definition of "agricultural labourer." Does it include "flax-mill employee"?

2. *Hon. Mr. Millar.*] It does not include them as the Bill stands?—As far as my experience goes in the country, particularly in regard to flax-mills, I think the employees are equally in need of reasonable accommodation as agricultural labourers, and in some respects more so. Agricultural labourers are generally located near a homestead, whereas the flax-mill employee is fifteen or sixteen miles away from a township, and relies entirely on the employer for his accommodation. The Council is of opinion that, so far as the accommodation to be provided is concerned, a tent is not sufficient if it is intended to apply to the homestead.

3. You are speaking mainly on behalf of the flax-mill employees and odd men?—Yes. I wish to give some instances of what I saw in connection with flax-mills. There is one mill at Himatangi, about four miles out of Foxton. I think it belongs to a man named Cooley. I found there a whare measuring about 12 ft. by 14 ft. with a 7 ft. stud. There was no attempt at ventilation beyond the door, it had no floor but the ground, and it had twelve men sleeping in it. I do not think the men could get out of their bunks all together—there would not be room for them. They work at a place eight or ten miles from civilisation, and the road would tax any one to get there on wheels. The men have to live in this whare: they have nowhere else to go. I found round the door of the dining-room—a fairly large one—or a few yards from it, a rubbish-heap consisting of empty tins and bones. The men had to spend their Sundays there. There is another instance: I am not sure about the owner of the mill, but it is the only mill there. I forget the name of the place, but it is about ten or twelve miles south of Wanganui. There was a fairly large whare there, but the owner objected to my inspecting it too closely. In a small place about 8 ft. by 10 ft. I found two bunks, the engineer sleeping in one and the cook in the other, and between the two the food for the men was piled up.

4. *The Chairman.*] That was the place where the supply of food was kept?—I am not sure that they had no other store, but I saw the food there stored between the two bunks. I looked into the dining-room and saw the meat stored round the walls where the men took their food. There is another mill near Shannon, on the Tokomaru Swamp. I saw an ordinary four-roomed cottage there, with two rooms in front and two behind. One room was used as a storehouse, one as a dining-room, and another had eight bunks in it. It was an ordinary small working-man's cottage, but the place was indescribably dirty. I never saw anything like it before in my life. To get into the door you had to go over your ankles in mud. I said to one of the men, "Surely you can do something to improve the place in the matter of cleanliness?" and he said, "Look where we have to go to get anything; there's not time."

5. Could they not have laid a few logs there?—They could have done so.

6. All those places were connected with flax-mills?—Yes. I could go on giving instances for a long time. I might say that I found one mill with excellent accommodation. Not far from the Foxton River I found two mills with huts 10 ft. or 12 ft. with two or three men in them. They would have accommodated four men, but generally there were only two, and the men were fairly comfortable. I mention these cases because it is obvious that, if one millowner can run his business by providing good accommodation, there is no reason why another should not be compelled to do so. I was speaking to Mr. Seiffert, a man remarkable for the good accommodation he provides for his men, and he emphatically says it pays him to do it because he gets a better class of men. I might say that previous to the coming into operation of the arbitration award I am satisfied that Mr. Seiffert could have got men for less wages than other men in his line. My evidence was collected with the view of inducing the Arbitration Court to include the provision of proper accommodation in the award. The Conciliation Board recommended certain accommodation for the men, but Mr. Justice Sim said it was not advisable to put anything in the award touching the accommodation at all. He made a recommendation that the millowners should provide good accommodation, but he might just as well have recommended them to pay good wages for all the attention they paid to it. Some of the employers themselves or representatives admitted in Court that there was great need for better accommodation in some of the mills.

7. Is it the case, with regard to flax-milling, that a contractor will often agree to cut flax on a particular property when he is not owner of the land at the same time?—Often.

8. In that case would you suggest any alteration in the Bill which would make him responsible for the accommodation?—The contractor must have a lease of the place before he puts his mill up. I recommend that the millowner should provide accommodation.