

REPORT.

The SECRETARY, Department of Labour, to the Hon. the MINISTER OF LABOUR.

SIR,—

Department of Labour, Wellington, 30th May, 1912.

I have the honour to present herewith the twenty-first annual report of this Department for transmission to His Excellency the Governor, in accordance with section 68 of the Factories Act, 1908, and section 12 of the Labour Department and Labour Day Act, 1908. The report covers the late financial year—viz., from the 1st April, 1911, to the 31st March, 1912.

I have, &c.,

JOHN LOMAS,

Secretary of Labour.

The Hon. the Minister of Labour.

THIS year marks the attainment of the Department's majority. For exactly twenty-one years the Department has conducted its work, and it is fitting that at this juncture a short historical review of its organization and growth should be given. In June, 1891, the Department commenced its operations, when it was called "The Bureau of Industries," and Mr. Edward Tregear (who retired from the position of Secretary in February, 1911) was placed in charge. Shortly afterwards, Mr. James Mackay, now deceased, joined the Department, and was subsequently appointed Chief Clerk; and about the same time I joined the clerical staff, and was transferred two years later to the charge of the Christchurch office as Inspector of Factories, &c. Of the officers appointed to the Department shortly after its inception only three are on the staff to-day—viz., Mr. James Shanaghan, Inspector in charge at Auckland (joined 1892), Mr. F. W. Rowley, Deputy Chief Inspector (1893), and Mr. J. W. Collins, Accountant (1894). The staff of three in 1891 has grown to eighty-eight in 1912, and the functions of the Department have enormously increased. Its chief work on establishment was to try to meet the "unemployed" difficulty, which at that time was most pressing in all the larger towns. To-day this work is an important branch; but the duty of administering what are generally known as the "labour" laws has formed the chief responsibility of the Department. It is a matter of common knowledge that these laws have been added to or amended from year to year during the twenty-one years under review, and Acts thought to be merely experimental in the early years have been amended and improved, as experience appeared to warrant, until they are now mostly looked upon by the large majority of our citizens as essential for the smooth, effective, and peaceful working of our growing industries. Some of the laws have served as models for other countries to copy, and it is probable that in some respects our legislation is more humane and far-reaching than any yet adopted elsewhere. The Factories Act still stands as one of the best-appreciated measures by all classes, whilst the Workers' Compensation Act has been of benefit to hundreds of workers at a time when assistance is most urgently needed. The Shops and Offices Act, too, is also working smoothly, and, given some amendments, it should prove one of the most humane and beneficial Acts administered by the Department. Of all the laws administered by the Department, however, the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, passed originally in 1894, calls for the exercise of the greatest tact and judgment. In these latter days there are critics who declaim its early repeal, but I do not think that the workers themselves as a whole, or the employers, or even the community generally, are dissatisfied with its principles, and desire to see a return to what may in New Zealand be regarded as the old strike methods of securing redress in industrial disputes. The number of union cancellations towards the end of the year under review showed an appreciable decline, and there appears to be no marked tendency on the part of the large unions now registered to break away from the Act.

In surveying the twenty-one years' history of the Department I look back upon a record of great and lasting work accomplished by the operation of the humanitarian laws administered by the Department, and the outstanding feature of all is the total abolition of "sweating" of the workers, and a recognition, hard-won perhaps, from both employers and workers that each has gained some mutual benefit by the operation of the labour laws of New Zealand.