

Although the major part of the Board's time has been devoted to the consideration of ways and means to relieve unemployment, it has been compelled to deal with a large amount of routine work associated with the administration of the Act.

For some months prior to the coming into force of the Act much information relative to the problems of unemployment, numerous requests for financial assistance, and other correspondence of a miscellaneous nature had been received by the Labour Department; this was transmitted to the Board for consideration and action.

Apparently the Unemployment Fund was looked upon by many people as a source from which money could be obtained without any special effort, as hundreds of requests were received for financial assistance by way of grants or loans. Many of these requests came from farmers, some from individuals who wished to be set up in business, others from firms and undertakings which presumably had found difficulty in obtaining finance elsewhere. The Act authorizes the Unemployment Board to make grants or loans to any persons or authorities to enable them to undertake, or to continue to carry on, developmental or other works calculated to relieve unemployment; but the essential point in this provision appears to have been overlooked by a large number of these applicants for assistance.

There were very many requests for work and sustenance, a large number of criticisms of the Act, and also of schemes for the alleviation of unemployment. Some of the last mentioned were of a distinctly helpful nature, others were decidedly impracticable, but all of these schemes required the consideration of the Board, and in many cases reports on their practicability were first obtained from Government Departments.

Natives.

A great deal of work has been involved in dealing with the admission of Maoris as contributors to the Unemployment Fund. The Act provides that every Native within the meaning of the Native Land Act, 1909, must register under the Act, but is exempt from payment of the levy unless he obtains the consent of the Board to become a contributor. At a very early date applications from Natives throughout the Dominion began to pour in, and it is thought that these were actuated, in general, by the desire of the Maori to be on the same footing as his pakeha brother. In this connection the Native Department has rendered valuable assistance, and up to the 31st March, 1931, some 1,827 Natives were accepted as contributors and the necessary arrangements made for them to effect payment of the levy.

Special consideration has been given also to the provision of suitable employment for unemployed Maoris, and reference is made to this in the supplementary section of the Board's report.

Relief of Unemployment.

In earlier paragraphs reference has been made to the rapidity with which unemployment developed towards the close of 1930, but in order to obtain a correct perspective of the early operations of the Board further emphasis must be placed upon the factor of urgency.

Far from being permitted reasonable latitude to consider means of combating the most serious evil of the present day, and to erect essential administrative organization and machinery, the Board was impelled by force of circumstances to immediate action.

The urgency of every question and requirement and the rapid approach of the Christmas and New Year period undoubtedly accentuated the difficulties confronting the Board, but, in spite of this, rapid progress was made in the formulation of schemes for unemployment relief.

It has been shown that the problem of unemployment was by no means peculiar to New Zealand. It had already assumed a relatively much more serious aspect in other countries, and it should be emphasized that no other country has been able to find a solution to the problem. The Dominion, by reason of its dependence on the activity and prosperity of the primary producer, is differently placed from most other countries, while the New Zealand legislation, unlike the unemployment-insurance schemes of other countries, was largely pioneer in character, making the imposition of the unemployment tax or levy of universal application for males of twenty years and over. The fund raised by this means was to be utilized for the provision of work for the unemployed, the payment of sustenance being made optional on the part of the Unemployment Board. While, therefore, information on the methods adopted elsewhere was available, the Unemployment Board was unable to take advantage of that knowledge to any extent, and thus found that it would require to break new ground in a search for means to provide the ever-increasing number of unemployed men with work. It was found also that in many instances the Act did not provide all the powers required, with the consequence that the work of the Board was rendered more difficult.

Had conditions been only slightly abnormal, the Board could reasonably have expected sufficient time to formulate its policy and organize methods of operation while still providing some relief for the unemployed. Instead, it was faced with the necessity of immediately finding relief for over 7,000 registered unemployed, with the prospect of the number increasing to the 15,000 anticipated by the Unemployment Committee as the maximum for which provision was likely to be necessary. The rapid development of the unemployment situation absorbed the Board's funds at an abnormal rate, and the necessity for provision of immediate relief handicapped its efforts in devising methods for stimulating employment of a permanent character in industry generally.

The first concern of the Board was to provide some immediate relief for the 7,000 men registered as unemployed, so that they might have some money at least to tide them over the holiday period. As a matter of policy, it was decided that work should be performed in return for relief granted, and that the payment of sustenance should be avoided at all costs so long as suitable work could be provided.