

THE APPRENTICE PROBLEM—A SIDELIGHT.

The Labour Department, taking an impartial survey of the industrial position, submits some criticism of the Arbitration Court system in its report to Parliament which raises an old question with some fresh facts. It quotes comparative figures of the wages awarded to unskilled or semi-skilled workers, and those awarded to skilled workers who have to serve an apprenticeship of four or five years, and concludes with the opinion that these figures are sufficient in themselves to account for the shortage of apprentices in New Zealand. It adds that the fact that the shortage is not entirely due to the breaking down of skilled trades by the introduction of machinery and specialisation is indicated from the fact that in the United States the wages of skilled workers range from 50 to 100 per cent. higher than for unskilled. The Department surveys the whole of the awards and agreements in the Wellington industrial district which were in force in July, 1921, and proves that the earnings per hour contrast as follows:—

Skilled trades requiring apprenticeship ... 1s. 10½d. to 2s. 3¾d.

Unskilled and semi-skilled trades ... 1s. 9½d. to 2s. 10d.

The comment of the Labour Department is that it will be seen that the *lowest*-paid wharf labourer has received 2s. 3d. per hour, and truckers in mines 2s. 1¾d. to 2s. 2½d. per hour, while the award rate (including bonus) for the *highest*-paid skilled workers in the building trade (which is also intermittent), after five years' apprenticeship, the purchase and maintenance of an expensive kit of tools, and in some cases the passing of an examination before they can work at their trade, has been 2s. 3¾d. per hour. The award rate (including bonuses) for a baker or a tailor (who must serve an apprenticeship of five years) has been 1s. 10½d. per hour, while a wool and grain storeman (who need not serve an apprenticeship) has received 2s. 1d. per hour, and a first-year tram conductor 1s. 10½d. plus uniform. The Court has recently laid down the principle that in awards the wages of skilled workers should be about 25 per cent. more than those of unskilled hands—viz., 2s. and 1s. 7d. per hour respectively (plus bonuses)—and several of the awards made during 1920 are based on this principle.

TIMBER AND THE TARIFF.

An effort to protect the New Zealand timber industry from the competition of foreign millers who can employ Chinese and Japanese labour in their mills was not well received by Parliament when the tariff schedules relating to timber import duties came under discussion. The case was well put by supporters of protection, including members of the Labour Party, who were impressed by the fact that the timber workers themselves saw the need for increased duties, so long as the consumer was

not prejudiced by increases in the cost of local timber. However, the opposition came from a number of farming members, and waxed so furious that nobody would have been surprised had an effort been made to divide the House on a proposal to take the duties off altogether. It was remarkable to hear the voice of the farmer in Parliament raised against an industry which alone has been singled out for price control within the country, while at the same time it has been denied the opportunity of enjoying world's parity for its product. Their singular inconsistency did not seem to occur to any of the dairying members, who have so strenuously fought for, and obtained at a cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money, the right to obtain for their product in New Zealand the free on board price for export. Nobody troubled to remind them of this change of attitude on a product which is not of the cow. One of the leading opponents of increased duties on timber has since been prominent in urging the Government to "pay up" on its equalisation fund, the final distribution having been delayed pending complete audit of dairy factory accounts. The only consolation to be obtained from the new tariff is the protection which the Government, in case of need, can give the New Zealand timber industry if there is any attempt to dump foreign timber upon the local market.

THE OUTLOOK.

Reduced shipping freights have given some encouragement to the New Zealand producer in starting the new season, and some readjustment of wages has also enabled the cost of production to be reduced. It is estimated that the freight reduction is equal to the cost of shearing the wool, and as prices appear to be improving for this commodity, the outlook is not quite so bad as it appeared a few months ago. Butter, which greatly steadied the finances of the Dominion last season, is weakening, but the best authorities believe that the real state of the English market is not yet disclosed, and that it will not necessarily be so poor as current conditions indicate. Low prices have lessened land values, and stimulated production. The times are trying to town and country alike, but there is no feeling of despair as we face the New Year. The country has a record of production per head which scarcely any other country in the world can equal. Therefore, in times of world slump, it is on the soundest footing—even though that footing might not be so firm as we would like. We can mutually hearten each other under these circumstances with the time honoured greetings of the season—

A MERRY CHRISTMAS

AND

PROSPERITY TO ALL

IN THE COMING YEAR.