

The number of bread-winners added to dependents shows (21,607 + 52,246) a total of 73,853 persons benefited by the work of this department.

Speaking generally, there has been full employment for all classes of workmen except in two trades. Building operations have been unusually brisk all over the colony; clothing-factories and woollen mills have been working full time, and in many cases have more orders in hand than they can execute for months to come. Unskilled labour has found more avenues to employment than have been open for many previous years. In the South the immense extension of gold-dredging has not only brought hundreds of men into the mining districts to work at and study the process, but the production of machinery and building of pontoons for the dredges has increased the output of engineering-shops and stimulated sister trades. In this connection the report of the local Inspector of Factories at Dunedin (printed herewith) is worthy of perusal. The rabbit-preserving industry is flourishing, and has the merit of employing labour in the winter after casual labourers are discharged from work in the harvest-field. As the average price earned at this business is nearly £2 10s. a week, it will be seen that a lucrative resource is offered to hands unwilling to be idle at a season when, in the South Island, work was extremely hard to get, the settlers in that part of the colony not having the bushfelling to turn to that in the North Island helps the labouring-man through the wet season. It has been noticed that there are now few old and decrepit men tramping the roads in search of work, and this hopeful sign is probably the result of assistance rendered them by the Old-age Pensions Act.

Factories.

The two branches of labour that have not shared the general prosperity are those of the printers and the bootmakers. The printers are feeling, and will, unhappily, continue to increasingly feel, the competition of improved machinery. The ablest and most economical men of the trade will, of course, survive longest at work, and will hold their own for many years we trust, but the outlook is not cheering, and for the young there is written above the door of the compositor's room, "All hope abandon ye who enter here." The bootmakers complain not only of the improved machinery ousting them from their employment, but of the growing speed insisted on at factory-work and early exhausting the worker, and also of the glut of low-priced imported goods. Whether an altered tariff would improve this latter condition or whether the remedy lies in co-operative establishments are questions admitting of grave debate and consideration.

The steady increase from year to year in the number of factories, and of the hands employed, has been well maintained, and their annual average raised by the numbers shown in the following return: For the year 1899 the factories number 6,286, and the employés 45,305, an increase of 685 factories and 5,633 workers therein on the return of 1898. The figures for the last few years stand as follows in regard to workpeople employed in registered factories: 1895, 29,879; 1896, 32,387; 1897, 36,918; 1898, 39,672; 1899, 45,305. This shows an increase of 15,426 persons in four years. These figures do not include 1,248 men and 152 apprentices employed in the railway workshops.

The above figures do not fully represent the persons employed in manufacturing industries. The figures are tabulated on returns furnished in the month of January of each year, and this is a slack time, especially in the dressmaking business. The number would bulk considerably larger if taken at a busy season, therefore the above must be taken as a minimum return.

Legislation is required at some near date to counteract, if possible, some unnecessary hardship to those colonists employed in industrial work. One of these hardships is that Chinese men are allowed to carry on laundry-work without any restriction of time, while European women are prevented by the Factory Act from working beyond certain hours in laundries. This is an unfair handicap to an industrious and poorly-paid class of women, and they should be put on a more equal footing by the restrictions (wisely applied to them for health's sake) being imposed also on their foreign competitors. Another evil is the unpaid work of young dressmakers, 773 unpaid girls being thus recorded for New Zealand. In my opinion, a minimum wage of 6d. a day should be given to any person employed for another, except, perhaps, in professional apprenticeships. That the work of young girls in dressmakers' shops is remunerated by the teaching they receive is often nothing but a hypocritical and untrue pretence.

The increase of hours is still complained of. Under the Factories Act of 1891 the hours allowed for women and young persons were forty-five per week, but the Act of 1894 added three hours to this amount, and the working women and girls complain that their wages remain at the old rate, while the hours have increased. The Arbitration Court in Dunedin fixed forty-five hours in one trade, and, if the principle of an eight-hours day for women is to obtain in the colony, it is desirable that the forty-five hours should be placed as the maximum time-limit.

Overtime has not been applied for so persistently as last year, but this does not show any falling-off in the pressure of business. It really resulted from the fact that ordinary overtime was not sufficient in some establishments, and double shifts were arranged.

I consider it unfair that in factories the restriction of working-hours should only apply to women. It gives men an unfair advantage in competition, and, if the restriction was imposed for health's sake, it is fully as necessary for many men as for women. It was reasonable in days before the suffrage was extended to women to regard them as needing protection not extended to the male voter, who could obtain legislative redress and consideration through his representative in Parliament. This disqualification has now been removed, and there is no reason why one sex should be given advantage over the other. This is urged not that women should have less protection from the law, but that men should have more.

SHOPS AND SHOP-ASSISTANTS ACTS.

These have been worked with great smoothness during the year. The irritation once felt by a few employers has disappeared, and it is certain that if by any evil chance the Act was repealed the