

SIR,—

Wellington, 31st March, 1899.

I have the honour to report that, acting under your instructions during the year ending the 31st March, 1899, I inspected factories and workrooms in the four centres, and in the small towns of both Islands.

I am pleased to state that the condition of factories generally is very satisfactory. In many of the small towns, however, the sanitary arrangements are not what they should be, and require the constant and unremitting attention of local Inspectors. Quite recently I visited a small town, and at every workroom I inspected I had to leave instructions for the cleaning and ventilation of workrooms, water-closets, &c. Some people seem to think that because they happen to live in a small town this law should not apply to them. Charcoal-irons are frequently used in small tailoring workshops, and I consider they should be strictly prohibited, as the fumes from the charcoal must be very injurious to the health of the workers. Wherever I find gas-stoves in use I always take care to see that they are well screened in, so that the fumes are carried out of the room; or, if possible, I have them removed out of the workrooms altogether.

Forty-eight working-hours per week is now the general rule throughout the colony, and looking at this increase of hours, from a logical point of view, means nothing but a substantial reduction of wages. This must be patent even to the most casual observer. Women who some years ago worked forty-five hours for a certain wage now have to work forty-eight hours per week for exactly the same amount of money. Not only does it mean a reduction of wages, but it also largely interferes with the distribution of employment. In large factories, where there are from fifty to a couple of hundred persons engaged, three hours each additional per week will soon accumulate such an over-supply of stock that when the slack season comes these workers will not be wanted, but will be turned into the streets to seek assistance elsewhere. Moreover, it is a great hardship on many delicate girls who live at long distances from their place of business. It means that they must have breakfast before 7 in the morning, and then, with the exception of a light lunch, they have to remain without another meal until nearly 7 in the evening. Much could be said to show what an important matter this is. I sincerely trust that another session will not be allowed to pass without the necessary alteration being made in the Act.

The regulation of apprentices is another important matter, and one which urgently requires legislative enactment. The present practice should be no longer tolerated. Quite recently I visited the workroom of a dressmaker where there were nine persons employed, and on asking to see the wages-sheet the employer informed me that she kept none, as her workers were all apprentices, and therefore not getting wages. This was in one of the large centres, but in the small towns I frequently find that if there is any staff at all they are what are called "apprentices," meaning unpaid hands. According to the returns given to the department in 1898 there were 773 apprentices engaged in the dressmaking trade alone, but as these returns are taken at a time of the year when, owing to the rush of trade being over, many workrooms are closed, doubtless this number is but the minimum. If these returns were taken about the end of November, or if employers were compelled to give a return for the whole year, I am sure the number of unpaid hands would be much augmented. The most deplorable part of the business is that these girls are not taught the trade at all, but are merely kept for waiting on the few advanced hands, and when the time comes that they should be expecting wages they are sent off and are replaced by a fresh batch. If a girl wants to learn the dressmaking trade now she has to pay a very substantial fee. As proof of this fact many dressmakers have now what they call "class-rooms," and the young women and girls who attend these class-rooms are only those who can well afford to pay the fee, so that the poor man's daughter who wants to learn the trade as a means of livelihood, and cannot afford to pay, has to go into the workroom and pick up what she can haphazard, and unless she is very smart she is very often turned out worse than when she went in. Looking at this question in a practical manner, I am sure you will agree with me that it is quite time something was done in the direction of forcing employers to recognise their responsibility to this large number of people.

I would still urge that the hours of Chinese laundry-keepers should be restricted. They are competing with the very poorest class of our working-women, and it would be only just to compel them to observe the same hours as those with whom they compete.

SHOPS AND SHOP-ASSISTANTS ACTS.

These Acts are working fairly well, but there is still room for a great deal of improvement. The hours of shop-assistants should be definitely stated—say, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. In some of the large towns women and girls are kept working till very late at night, and I am sure it would be much better for their health to have the evening hours in which to rest and prepare themselves for their next day's work, instead of being shut up in these stuffy places inhaling the fumes of gas. It should also be compulsory for all shop-assistants to be paid for overtime, and at a higher rate than 6d. per hour. Inspectors should have full powers to inspect wage-records whenever necessary. Shops which close on days other than the regular closing-day are still a source of great trouble to Inspectors.

In Wellington especially, Chinese dealers are a source of great trouble. It seems to be almost impossible to get them to observe the law. Many of them may be found carrying out goods at almost any hour on Wednesday afternoons, and when they are spoken to they never understand. Some very drastic legislation should be passed empowering Inspectors to deal more ably with this class. In fact, I should recommend that the Chinese should be strictly prohibited from trading in any shape or form on the afternoon of the half-holiday.