

The number of departmental workmen employed on these operations, as at the 31st March, 1947, was 238, comprising 78 working units engaged on carpentry, painting, plumbing, bricklaying, and plastering. Departmental employees include 31 Maori youths. The maximum number of workmen employed at any one period during the year was 271, as compared with the peak figure of 198 during the previous year. In addition to work undertaken by the Department's own employees, a considerable amount of special trade work has been carried out by private contractors, who have also erected and renovated several houses.

One major difficulty with which the Department is confronted is the non-availability of skilled tradesmen to undertake or take charge of work in country areas, where the greatest volume of activities lies. There is at present an unbalanced distribution of key tradesmen between town and country places, and rural areas are at a disadvantage in having their housing requirements fulfilled on a *pro rata* basis with urban areas. This is a matter which requires some adjustment in order that a more even distribution of skilled labour can be arranged to the benefit of rural communities. Until this problem can be solved in so far as departmental activities are concerned, full use cannot be made of available unskilled Maori labour, on which the progress of Maori housing is so largely dependent under present circumstances. If housing costs are to be maintained at a reasonable economic level, there must be a proper balance between skilled and unskilled labour.

Operations have been seriously affected by limited transport facilities and the slow delivery of key building-materials, notably roofing, wallboard, timber, and certain sanitary fittings, particularly baths. Under these conditions it is difficult to maintain full-time employment of workers on scattered rural works. The material position has delayed the completion of a large number of dwellings.

During the year it was possible to facilitate bulk-purchasing arrangements for material by the institution of a system of contracts for supply with various manufacturers and merchants throughout New Zealand. In these negotiations the utmost co-operation was received from suppliers and supply authorities, who have assisted to the best of their ability in the delivery of materials consistent with production and transport difficulties. A considerable quantity of fittings and materials was purchased from War Assets surplus stores.

The rate of timber-supplies has fluctuated extensively, the position in the central and North Auckland districts, Hawke's Bay, and parts of the east coast being most acute. In this direction, endeavours are being made for a more equitable distribution by arrangements with milling interests operating on Maori-owned timber blocks. An annual supply of not less than 4,000,000 ft. to 5,000,000 ft. of timber is required to maintain a progressive rate of house-construction.

The development of works and stores depots has been extended for the purpose of providing improved facilities for field operations, store-sheds having been erected at Rotorua, Manunui, and Levin. Negotiations are also in hand for permanent stores and plant depots at Auckland, Kaikohe, and Hastings, the last-named centre until now having been established on a tenancy basis, which has not proved satisfactory. Arrangements are almost completed with the Public Works Department for the operation of a joint departmental workshop scheme at Gisborne, where the Native Department will function as a separate unit in the manufacture of joinery and timber working for Maori housing on the east coast. The centre will also be used for the trade training of Maori youths employed with the building organization.

At Rotorua the departmental works-centre project has been gradually developed, first attention being given to the timber-yard and machining requirements. Plans are well in hand for the development of this centre as a major function of the district's building activities in the matter of pre-cutting, joinery-manufacture, and trade training wherein the requirements of adjoining districts will also be met.