

DUNEDIN.

SIR,—

Department of Labour, Dunedin, 9th April, 1908.

In accordance with the provisions of section 64 of "The Factories Act, 1901," I have the honour to submit, for your information, a report on matters appertaining to the business of the Department in the Dunedin District for the year ending 31st March, 1900.

GENERAL.

In reviewing the operations of the various labour regulations during the past twelve months, and their effect upon industrial and manufacturing interests in this part of the Dominion, it is gratifying to note that, generally speaking, the ultimate result for the period under consideration compares very favourably with former years.

A retrospective glance as to the condition of the workers would indicate—first, that more persons have been actually employed than has previously been the case in the history of this district; secondly, that employment has been of a more continuous nature; and thirdly, that the supply has not exceeded the demand as evidenced by the large amount of overtime worked in a variety of industries. As a natural sequence, a large amount of capital in the shape of wages has been circulated, and, it may be assumed, with natural benefits to the trading community.

Viewed from the employers' point of view, while it is quite probable that better financial returns may have been experienced during former years, there is nothing tending to suggest that the business transactions connected with manufacturing interests of the past twelve months have been of an unprofitable character. Indeed, it may safely be asserted that the tone of trade has improved. It is also to be regarded as a reassuring sign that the present condition and future outlook is favourable, as an extension of operations in many lines is contemplated, and in some cases has already become an accomplished fact.

One matter of importance that has received considerable attention here, in common with other portions of the Dominion, is the shortage of workers, and to a very large extent there is a pronounced element of truth in the statement made by employers that the dearth of labour has considerably retarded several industries. It is not, however, suggested that this shortage has any application to adult artisans, so that, while it may be correctly assumed that various contracts have been delayed through this cause, the inconvenience was in reality brought about more through extraordinarily busy periods in one or two lines than through any insufficiency of workers.

So far as tradesmen are concerned, there is an ample supply of all classes to meet future contingencies for at least some time to come.

A scarcity, however, does exist in those industries where young persons and women workers are usually employed, and substantial reasons are advanced by those interested towards showing that the general conditions of these trades at present warrant, and their future prospects indicate, that the trouble is not of a temporary nature, and if allowed to continue will become very acute in the near future.

So far as this district is concerned, there is no immediate reason for concluding that any improvement is likely to take place for some time to come, as a reference to the return of the Education Board of Otago shows that the average daily attendance of the pupils at the local schools is undergoing a gradual decrease in numbers since 1887, the figures being for that year 4,148 pupils, while for the year 1907 the number was reduced to 2,882, or, taking the whole of the provincial district, the figures for the year 1887 are 19,258, as against 17,152 for 1907; the outlook under these circumstances, therefore, is not by any means promising if the supply of this class of worker is to be obtained in this part of the Dominion.

It is noteworthy that no serious difficulty has occurred between employers and any section of the employees. Differences of opinion have at times arisen as to values and conditions of labour, &c., but nothing has transpired that has directly or indirectly caused either inconvenience or disturbance to trade or business.

Indications as to the prospects of the incoming year appear to be favourable. Skilled industries, with one or two exceptions, should be able to maintain their present standard. The extension and use of electricity as a motive power, and the abundance of cheap local coal, should prove valuable factors in cheapening the cost in many avenues of trade, while the effect of the preferential tariff will undoubtedly tend to assist and improve confidence in manufacturing concerns generally. Neither should there be any reason for alarm on account of providing sufficient work for unskilled labourers, the reticulation in connection with increased gas and water supply, the completion of the drainage scheme within the city and suburbs, extensive alterations in harbour-works, the continuance of the Mosgiel-Dunedin duplication-works, and other provincial lines, together with the ordinary expenditure of money in enterprises of a private nature, should be a sufficient guarantee that this class will not experience any scarcity of opportunity of finding employment.

Throughout the year building trades have made good time, and very few idle tradesmen have been in evidence. Bricklayers, plasterers, and carpenters have been kept busy. Stonemasons have not been so fortunate, and a number of artisans in this branch have experienced considerable slackness. Plumbers, painters, and paperhangers have been quite up to the average of former years.

Dressmakers and milliners, shop and factory tailoresses, boot-machinists, and table hands have had an exceptionally busy year. In all these lines manufacturers have complained of their inability to obtain a sufficiency of workers. Shop tailors have also had a good run of trade, and a considerable amount of overtime has been called into requisition.

Cabinetmaking and furnishing trades are not so good as during the previous year, and have experienced times of slackness.