

SHOPS AND OFFICES ACT.

Very little difficulty has been experienced in administering this Act. In a large number of the trades a majority of the shopkeepers have availed themselves of the provisions of section 25 of the Act to arrange for a fixed closing-time in their respective trades. This has, of necessity, considerably increased the work of Inspectors, who are now compelled to make frequent visits to different parts of the town and surrounding districts between the hours of 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. in order to ascertain whether the "requisitions" in force are being complied with. The following trades in the City of Christchurch are closing under "requisition"—viz., jewellers, boot and shoe dealers, chemists, butchers, cycle and motor dealers, grocers, and the general storekeepers in the following outside places—New Brighton, Sumner, Spreydon, Woolston, Riccarton, and Heathcote. A few of the shopkeepers have thought fit to ignore these "requisitions," and have been brought before the Court.

The shops closing-day still remains Thursday, as carried last year, when a ballot was taken by the local authorities to decide the matter.

During the year 1,213 shops were registered, in which 2,276 assistants were employed—viz., 1,572 males and 704 females. There were also 1,060 male and 163 female employers engaged in shops.

Thirty-one cases under this Act were taken before the Court, and judgment in favour of the Department obtained in every case.

The total penalties imposed under this Act amounted to £18 1s.

The returns show that there has been a slight increase in the amount of overtime worked during the year, principally by the employment of female assistants at stocktaking and other special work, such as ticketing for sales, &c. 1,051 shop-assistants—viz., 564 males and 487 females—worked 11,680 hours.

I would respectfully suggest that, with a view of safeguarding the interests of employees, and to prevent any doubt arising as to whether any award overrides the Act in respect to the half-holiday, the clauses in sections 3 and 6 providing that the limit of hours, &c., should be subject to any award of the Court should be made more clear.

I would also urge the necessity of provision being made in any subsequent amendments to the Shops and Offices Act to provide for the erection of a suitable fire-escape in all cases where the business of a shop is carried on on a floor above the ground floor, as in many cases the occupiers of tea-rooms and restaurants employing a large number of assistants are carrying on business until nearly midnight in upstairs premises with no alternate means of escape in case of fire, and should a conflagration happen serious loss of life might occur.

INDUSTRIAL CONCILIATION AND ARBITRATION ACT.

During the year there have been no strikes. The amendment of the Act abolishing Conciliation Boards and appointing Conciliation Commissioners has been welcomed by both parties, and up to the present a large percentage of the cases filed have been settled without recourse to the Arbitration Court.

No great difficulty has been experienced in enforcing the provisions of this Act, or of any award or agreement in force. The Amendment Act of 1908, which came into operation in January of last year, providing for wage-book and for copy of awards or agreements to be posted up, has simplified matters in connection with breaches, and has enabled Inspectors to bring law-breakers to book almost at once. Magistrates have liberally interpreted the various Acts, awards, and agreements, and their judgments have generally supported the Department. The penalties imposed have been generally smaller than those formally imposed by the Arbitration Court, but the publicity given to these cases deters many others from committing offences, and perhaps also the offences have been hardly as serious as those brought before the Arbitration Court in past years. The large number of awards and agreements in force in this district has compelled periodical inspection, and every town of any importance between the Rangitata River (South) and the Clarence River (North) has been visited during the year.

The employment of members of an employer's family continually gives rise to difficulties; such as failing to indenture, unfair proportion of apprentices, failing to give preference of employment, deductions from wages for board and lodging, &c. If an amendment of the Act was inserted to meet such cases it would give general satisfaction to both sides.

The provision of section 58 of the Act binding all employers bound by an award or agreement to keep an overtime and wages book has been very beneficial, and has enabled Inspectors to quickly ascertain the hours worked and the wages paid to the employees. Several employers who failed to comply with this section were brought before the Court and fined for their neglect.

During the year inquiries were made into 542 complaints made by secretaries of unions and others. It was found that in most cases no offence had been committed, in some that the offence was quite trivial. Some breaches were committed through ignorance or oversight, generally in a failure to give proper increases of wages when due, or to pay the full overtime rates for work done. Altogether the sum of £274 12s. 6d. was collected from 58 employers under these heads, and it was found necessary to take no less than 88 cases for enforcement of awards before the Magistrates. Of these, 78 favourable judgments were received; 7 cases were dismissed (nearly all through witnesses "going back" on statements made to the Inspector); and in 2 cases the Magistrates stated cases for the opinion of the Arbitration Court, and no judgment has yet been received; one in which the Magistrate decided we had no jurisdiction, and for which a writ of mandamus has been applied to compel the Magistrate to adjudge upon the case. These cases covered the whole of the industrial district between the Rangitata and Clarence Rivers.

Penalties imposed by Magistrates under this Act for breaches of awards or agreements total £103 18s.