

Act, the Arbitration Court in any case—even if it desired to do so—could not fix a rate of wages or alter the conditions in a manner contrary to the Public Contracts Act, because the Arbitration Court cannot make an award contrary to an Act of Parliament, and it was foolish for the men to go to the Arbitration Court at all. At that time a number of men were working at both ends of the tunnel on Sundays at the ordinary rate of pay, and that was a grievance, because in no industrial agreement in New Zealand was it provided that men should work on Sundays at less than time and a half, and under many industrial agreements double time was paid for the work. It was quite a common thing at Otira to see twenty or thirty men or more going to work on Sunday and working at the ordinary rate. There was another grievance that the men had. In the mines of this country where a place is wet six hours constitute a day's work, and the men thought they were entitled to that. Mr. McLean agreed to that, but he was going to be the arbitrator as to what constituted a wet place. That, in our opinion, was a very unreasonable position to take up, and we suggested as a solution the only thing that we could think of. There were three Government Inspectors, one on each shift. They were neither employed by the contractor nor did they have anything to do with the union, and we were quite willing that where we failed to agree as to what was a wet place one of the Government Inspectors should act as arbitrator, whose decision should be final. Mr. McLean has always refused to recognize arbitration there, taking up the attitude that he himself was going to be the arbitrator, which was very unsatisfactory. The reason why, in my opinion, it is hard to get suitable labour at Otira is that the conditions do not compare favourably with those of underground works in any other part of this country. The conditions are worse than in any mine that I know of. The hours of labour are the longest, and the rates of wages, when you take into consideration the hours that they work at Otira, are little, if at all, higher than are paid to miners in other parts of New Zealand. They work at Otira forty-eight hours a week. In the North Island the miners have been working forty-six hours a week for the last twenty years, and the hours in the North Island are counted from bank to bank. At the Otira Tunnel the eight hours are worked at the face, and it is something like eight hours and forty minutes from the time the men go into the tunnel until they come out again. When we take into consideration the fact that they work forty minutes longer per day than the men do in any mine in New Zealand, and also that they work two hours longer on Saturday, we see that that amounts to six hours per week; and, although the wages are slightly higher at Otira than in the mines, if you put that six hours down at overtime rates you will find that some of the workers employed underground at Otira are being paid actually less for the hours that they work than the men are in the mines at Reefton. We have had deputations to the Minister of Mines—to Mr. McGowan when he was Minister, to Mr. McKenzie, and to Mr. Colvin—asking that the Otira Tunnel be brought under the provisions of the Mining Act. If that were done I believe it would prove a solution of the difficulty: far better conditions would prevail, and there would be little or no difficulty in getting suitable labour. I have seen as many as five hundred men thrown out of work at Reefton; these men were running round all over the coast looking for work, yet there was a scarcity of labour at Otira. If you speak to any of those men and ask them why they do not go to Otira, they will tell you they would not work under the conditions prevailing at Otira for less than £1 a day. Nearly all those miners have been at Otira and have left again. I believe that Otira has been better supplied with labour than any mine in New Zealand. I do not know the number of men that have been there, but I think that if returns were given showing the number of men that have been engaged and have left the Otira Tunnel it would be startling. Nearly every miner that you drop across in New Zealand has been at Otira at some time or other, and given it up and gone to look for work somewhere else. They have had at Otira, to my knowledge, some of the best men in New Zealand; and if the conditions were anything like reasonable to work under, I am perfectly satisfied they would have stopped there. There are hundreds of good miners in New Zealand who would gladly go to Otira and make their homes there, where there is five or six years' steady work, if the conditions were anything like reasonable. Now, if this tunnel were brought under the provisions of the Mining Act, or the conditions that are enjoyed by the miners of this country were enjoyed also by the tunnel-workers at Otira, things would be greatly improved. For instance, we should have a Mining Inspector, who would visit there from time to time. He would see that the place was properly timbered and properly ventilated, and that they were more careful in the use of explosives and different things. I believe that in the mines of New Zealand, if it were not for the Mining Inspectors keeping them up to the mark, the number of accidents would be a hundred per cent. more than at the present; and the same thing must apply to the Otira Tunnel. They are very nearly two miles in now from the mouth of the tunnel, and it requires miners for the work. If the tunnel is not a mine within the meaning of the Act, then it should be, because the men are doing underground work, and they are further underground than in any mine in New Zealand. I desire only to add this: I do not think it is fair for the contractors to allege labour trouble, because they have not had much of that; any labour trouble they have had since my time has been brought about by the unreasonable tactics of the employers. I can quite understand their making a mistake in forming their estimates of what it would cost to carry out a large undertaking of that kind. I believe that if the work were taken over by the Department and carried out either by day-labour or under the co-operative system the work could be done cheaper and quicker, and would be more satisfactory to all concerned.

20. *Mr. McLean.*] What reason did we advance for not meeting you as a representative of the workers?—The reason advanced was, if I remember aright, that I was not employed by you; that you would do business with your own men, individually or collectively, but that you objected to outside interference.

21. Are you quite certain that that was the reason given?—That was one of the reasons given at the meeting.