

Queer Things in Labor and Wages in Australia

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 SYDNEY, Australia, May 14.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—
 The workingman's continent!

That is how the people down here speak of the new Australia. They say they propose to make it the paradise of the laborer. They have all sorts of schemes to propose to the federal Parliament, the gist of which seems to be how to sell the least work for the most money. The country already has the eight-hour law. This is common in every city and town. It was adopted by some firms more than a generation ago, and is now a fixed institution. There are all sorts of laws as to factories. The regulations of disputes between labor and capital are much the same as those of New Zealand. The various trades have rules as to the employment of their members, and the government has the right to send inspectors to the shops at any time, and it can compel the employers to respect the laws. Records must be kept showing just what each man does, how long he works and what he gets. The law as to holidays is rigidly observed, and there are all sorts of restrictions accompanied by appropriate penalties.

Employers cannot be paid in store orders. Children under thirteen cannot work in the factories, and the limitations as to the hours of their work are very strict. It is the same as to girls clerking in the stores, although in some cases fifty-two hours per week is there permitted. There must be recesses at fixed intervals for meals. In many of the shops there are recesses for smoking, and, in fact, such institutions are run with quite as much regard to the laborer as to the employer.

Probable Tariff for Revenue.

There is quite a difference of opinion here as to the effect which the labor laws have on the country. I have met many employers who tell me it is almost impossible to do business on the present basis, and that in hard times they will have to shut down. There are others who say the eight-hour law is all right, although a protective tariff is needed to keep the shops going. The probable result will be that the commonwealth will have to adopt such a tariff as will foster home industries, and that the raw materials which Australia sells in the shape of wool and grain will have to foot the national bills.

I recently had a chat with John Perry, minister of labor for New South Wales, and a man who is noted as being at the front of Australia's modern labor movement. We talked of the eight-hour day. Said he:

"It is generally thought that we have an eight-hour law here in Australia. That is not so, although custom has made it practically the fact. The eight-hour law would not suit us so well as the forty-eight-hour-per-week law. Many of our trades are such that they cannot be restricted to a fixed time. Some days a man must work more than eight hours and sometimes less. Take the bakers. They set their sponge, and if the dough rises they can get through their work in less than eight hours, but if not it takes them nine, or perhaps longer. What we want is a fixed time per week and an extra rate for all overtime."

"What rate would you charge for overtime?" said I.

"We have considered the matter very carefully, and we believe that 50 per cent



AUSTRALIAN WOOL WASHERS RECEIVE ELEVEN DOLLARS PER WEEK.

extra is not too much. That is, if a man is getting 25 cents an hour, or \$2 per day, he should have 37½ cents for overtime. At that rate an eight-hour day would bring him in \$2 and a ten-hour day \$2.75. We think that the same proportion should be awarded as to piecework where the employer wants extra work done."

"But could you enforce laws of that kind, Mr. Perry?" I asked.

"We propose to try it," was the reply. "We are going to fix it so that employers cannot overwork their men. We will make such regulations that the laborer cannot enter into any agreement which shall be for the employer's benefit if contrary to the law. We shall allow the men to sue for their overtime, with the 50 per cent additional. We will make the employers keep records of all such time, and will see that they make the payments under penalty."

Australia as a Manufacturing Country.

"But have you many factories in Australia?"

"Yes," said the labor commissioner. "We are doing a great deal of manufacturing, and we shall do more when we adopt the protective tariff law. We have all sorts of work, especially in the colony of Victoria, where there are boot and shoe factories, machine and iron works and all sorts of mills. In Queensland there are sugar mills and woolen mills. There is some cloth made in Queensland which will compare favorably with any in England. There are five woolen mills here in New South Wales. We have shipbuilding yards, furniture establishments and machine works. We have excellent coal from the mines of New Cas-

tle, not far from here, and easily reached by water. Australia has deposits of iron and there is no reason why manufacturing industries should not grow up. So far the freights from England have been so low that manufactured goods could be imported more cheaply than they could be made. Each colony has had its own tariff laws, and it has been impossible to regulate matters so that the goods made in one colony might be sold at the same price throughout Australia. Now that we have federation, we intend to wall Australia about with such a protective tariff as will make it self-supporting. That is what you Americans have done and what we propose to do."

Australia's Government Clerks.

"How about your government work, Mr. Labor Commissioner?" I asked.

"That is all on the forty-eight-hour per week basis," was the reply. "The wages are practically fixed by the unions and the time by the government. Everyone knows what the wages are to be and contractors make their bids accordingly. We can object if the labor is poor and demand that better men be employed, but the wages and time are fixed."

"Is there not a large force in the government employ?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Minister Perry, "but I doubt whether on the whole we have many more government clerks than you have. We have the railroads, the telephones and the street cars under the government, but you must remember that you have an enormous number of employes in America."

"How many have you here in New South Wales?" I asked.

"We have 32,000 on our salary list," said Mr. Perry, "and some others on piece work."

"And what is your population?"

"About 1,356,000," was the reply.

"Well," said I, "let us figure it. Divide your 1,356,000 by 32,000 and you will find that at least one man in every forty is a government employe. If we had as many employes in the United States, with our population of 80,000,000, we would have 2,600,000 government officials, which, at the low average of \$500 per year, would cost us at least \$1,300,000,000 a year."

"I don't know, but I should not be surprised to hear that a careful counting of all your officials, including government clerks, school teachers, policemen, etc., would almost foot up that many."

Does the Eight-Hour Law Pay?

"Do you really think the eight-hour law pays, Mr. Perry?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, can you run the country on an eight-hour basis? At present you have much developed land and the chances for money-making are many. When Australia becomes settled and the profits decrease, can you run your business here on eight hours, when Europe has ten or twelve, and all Asia more?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Perry, "but I believe such things regulate themselves. You work short hours in the United States and still you are beginning to manufacture for the world. It may be that the shorter hours give your men time to think, and hence the Yankee inventions for which you are so famous. A fresh man will do twice as much as a tired man and I believe we get better work by shorter hours. After a man works ten hours he comes home dog tired and throws himself on the lounge or the floor, prepared to be disagreeable. He has no time to get acquainted with his family nor to think of anything outside of his routine work. Our laborers are, I believe, the happiest of the world. Most of them own their own homes. They live well, but they save money."

"But do not the short hours increase loafing and drunkenness?"

"I don't think so," was the reply. "Those who drink will drink anyhow. Those who

are industrious find time to do work about their homes and a great many spend their leisure in going about with their families. The men feel better, they respect themselves more and are far better citizens."

Australia's Unemployed.

"But still you have many unemployed?"

"Yes, but not so many now as some years ago. One department of my bureau is devoted to the unemployed. The first year that this branch was established we found places for 8,000 laborers, in the second for 19,000 and in the fourth for 29,000. The



IN AN AUSTRALIAN LABOR SETTLEMENT.

chief duty of the bureau was to get the men to the places where the work was. We gave a great many railroad and steamship passes, allowing the men to take care of themselves as soon as they reached their places of work. When the times were hard we organized relief works in which a part of the wages were paid in rations. This was along after the panic of 1891 and 1892. We had a great many bank failures. There was general distress throughout Australia and thousands were thrown out of work. At present the times are good, although there are always more or less unemployed. We now have something like 100 applications a day, sometimes more, sometimes less."

The conversation here turned to wages, and Mr. Perry said he believed that the workingman of Australia received more and lived better than his fellow in any part of the world. He brought out a late government report by Mr. T. A. Coghlan on the "Wealth and Progress of New South Wales," and showed me the wages the men were getting in 1900. Here are some of them:

Carpenters, blacksmiths, bricklayers and masons are paid \$2.25 per day; plasterers and painters receive \$2; common laborers, \$1.62, while boiler-makers get \$2.50; wool washers get \$11 a week; farm laborers, \$4.50 a week, with board, and shepherds about \$200 a year. The wages of house servants are about the same as with us. Girls of all work get \$2.25 per week; housemaids, \$2.75; nurses, \$1.75, and washer-women and cooks, \$2.75 per week.

They Live High.

We also talked of the cost of living, and from the same source I was given the prices of many things. They are fully as low as in the United States, and in many cases much lower. We pay 5 cents for a one-pound loaf of bread. The Australian gets a two-pound loaf for the same money. Our beef costs us from 15 to 20 cents a pound; he buys his for about 5 cents a pound. He pays 25 cents a pound for but-

ter, 16 cents a pound for cheese, 4 cents for sugar, 1½ cents for rice, 17 cents for bacon and 37 cents for tea. His eggs cost him 25 cents a dozen, his beer 50 cents a gallon and his tobacco from \$1 to \$1.50 a pound.

The Australian has to pay as much in the way of house rents as the average American workman, and he has as a rule poorer accommodations. In Sydney a three-room flat costs about \$9 a month or something like 75 cents per room per week. A four-room house costs about \$10 and a five-room house about \$12 a month. Very few of the laboring men live in houses of more than five rooms unless they have grown-up sons or daughters to contribute to the family earnings.

What They Eat.

As far as I can see the workingmen live very well. Few of them have wrinkles in their stomachs or hollows in their cheeks. The average cost of the food consumed per inhabitant is \$84 a year, while our average is less than \$60 a year. They are great meat eaters, and in New South Wales last year they ate 96,000 tons of beef, 68,000 tons of mutton and 8,000 tons of pork and bacon, footing up a total of \$25,000,000 worth of meat for one colony alone. The meat is good, too. You will find no better mutton anywhere, and the beef is as fat and as juicy as the best cuts of Chicago.

I am surprised at the amount of tea which these Australians drink. They will tea as the German swills beer. Every person has his cup of tea every afternoon, and, like as not, another cup or so later in the evening. They drink more tea than any other nation except the Russians. They drink it everywhere. It is served without extra charge at hotels, and at the railroad stations it is given out at 80 much per cup at the same tables as the beer and whisky. The tea is always served with milk and sugar, and every person takes four lumps. The people have sweet teeth, and they eat so much sugar that their teeth are often decayed. This is a good place for a dentist, and I am surprised more American dentists do not come here to practice.

As to whisky and beer, the consumption is large. It varies in different parts of Australia. Here in New South Wales they drink less than in Victoria, and everywhere less than in western Australia, where the

consumption of whisky amounts to about five gallons annually for every man, woman and child in the country, or from twenty to twenty-five gallons per family. The amount of beer consumed there averages twenty-four gallons per head, or about 100 gallons per family per annum.

Labor Settlements.

One of the queer labor movements of Australia resulted in the establishment of a number of labor colonies or settlements in the different states. This occurred along about the panic of 1892 and 1893, when there was a vast number of unemployed. Several of the colonies set aside lands for settlers and advanced money to them. In some settlements the lands were held in common, and in others they were so arranged that after a given time the people could vote whether they should continue to hold them as a settlement or should divide them up among themselves. There are two such settlements in New South Wales—one at Wilberforce and the other at Bega. The Bega settlement is about 300 miles west of Sydney and twelve miles from the coast, on the Bega river. To reach it you go on the railroad to within seventy-four miles of the place and then take a coach, or you can go by steamer twice a week. The settlement has twenty-eight families and is said to be a success.

South Australia has similar settlements 100 miles or so from Adelaide on the Murray river. Each of these settlements was given 16,000 acres to hold in common and each was advanced something like \$1,000 for buying tools and stock. The people have built houses, set out orchards and are engaged in farming of various kinds. They have, I am told, many lemon and olive orchards and flocks of sheep. They work but eight hours, the day's labor beginning and ending with the blowing of a horn. They have a common store and have attempted to run their villages on socialistic lines.

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SCENE ON THE STREETS OF SYDNEY, AN EIGHT-HOUR TOWN.