

# The Unemployment Problem

The Situation with Regard to Unemployment in Montreal and Probably Elsewhere While Not Free from Anxiety Gives Little Cause for Serious Present Alarm.

By a Staff Correspondent.

"The Federal, the Provincial and the municipal authorities all have large and wide powers which should prove adequate to the solution of any unemployment problem that one can foresee as likely to arise in this Province of Quebec and probably in the country as a whole."

Such is the view of Mr. L. Guyon, the Deputy Minister of Labor for the Province of Quebec, as expressed in the course of a talk I had with him. Mr. Guyon does not deny that there are some sign of stringency apparent on the industrial horizon, but, while these may give cause for certain anxiety as to the near future, he is not of opinion that they afford justification for serious present alarm. That is how he views the situation in the Province as a whole, including the city of Montreal which, for various reasons and on various grounds, might almost be regarded as in a class by itself. For Montreal, in respect of the unemployment question, as the national seaport and as by far the largest commercial centre in Canada, presents, especially at this season of the year, a many-sided problem with respect to this question of unemployment. The complexity of this problem, moreover, is considerably added to by reason of the city's large foreign population.

## Some Industries Getting Slack.

"There is always," Mr. Guyon went on to say, "a danger of things getting tight in the fall, owing to certain industries which afford occupation for part of the year only, and not for the whole year, getting slack then. For example, concrete work above ground is on a very small scale, while below ground none of such work is done. Then, too, the closing of navigation necessarily lessens the opportunities of employment."

"Further, while there is, as I have said, always a danger of things getting tight in the fall, the situation is probably accentuated at present by other conditions. There is unquestionably a certain amount, be it greater or less, of depression of trade, just now. The high cost of living, in all, or in most, of its many phases, is, in my opinion, very largely responsible for this. In this department we have our finger, so to speak, on the pulse of much of this kind of thing."

"Take the sugar industry, for instance, by which expression I mean the making of candy, etc. Every year, about this time, it is customary for all our large candy factories to make application to this department for permits for their employees to work overtime. These we are accustomed to grant, as we consider that it is in the industrial interests of the community that we should do so. But, this year, we have not been asked to issue any of such permits at all. That fact is

not without its significance. Again, at the close, as at the opening, of navigation, we usually have quite a demand from shoe factories for permits of the same kind. But this year we have not been asked for any. There is too, as I understand, quite a lot of unemployment in the machinists' trade."

## Conditions Only Temporary.

However, Mr. Guyon is far from disposed to take a pessimistic view of the situation.

"The cotton trade," he proceeded, "seems to be holding up moderately well. And, generally, I feel that such depression as exists can only be temporary. The large factories that are locating in Canada should be a pretty safe barometer as to this. Those who are responsible for their location here are looking beyond the immediate present. Spring activities should, and I have no doubt will, bring about a great and welcome relief in the situation. Even as regards the period on which we have just entered, I do not fancy that we are going to experience a winter of any such extraordinary hardship as I can remember in the 'seventies and even in the early 'eighties. As I remarked just now, the conjoint powers of the Federal, Provincial and municipal authorities should prove adequate to any situation that one can foresee as likely to come about. There are promises of big public works being inaugurated which should help things out immensely. And, looking beyond this winter, I have yet to see the year when the opening of navigation did not result in opening up work generally."

## Unemployed in Montreal.

What is the present number of the unemployed in Montreal? It is difficult to ascertain this with any approach to accuracy. For there is no one central body in the city which can furnish definite information on this head. Many of the large industrial concerns have each their own unemployment bureau equipped with a manager and the help necessary to operate it. The Labor organizations—at any rate, the strong ones—have their own labor bureaux. There are sixteen private employment agencies in the city. The operations of these latter are confined very largely to unskilled labor. Then there are the Free Employment Bureaux of the Province of Quebec which are worked in cooperation with the Employment Service of Canada. The operations of these are concerned very largely with unskilled labor and domestic labor and, to a certain extent only, with skilled labor.

Thus it is a matter of extreme difficulty to collate the necessary data whereon to found a reliable estimate of the actual number of unemployed in the city. There are always people ready to exaggerate unemployment to preposterous dimensions. On the

other hand, there are those who will dismiss it as a matter so limited in scope as to be scarcely worthy of serious mention. Just now, the truth probably lies about midway between the two. There is, in the view of many well qualified to judge, whether as representing large industrial concerns, or as being engaged in placing, or attempting to place, labor, with whom one has had the opportunity of discussing the matter, a certain abnormal amount of unemployment. At the same time, it seems to be the consensus of informed opinion that there is no present reason to apprehend a crisis of such a nature as has been freely predicted since the termination of the war. Informed opinion seems to incline to the view that the number of unemployed, inclusive of both sexes, in Montreal is somewhere in the neighborhood of 20,000. But this figure can only be mentioned tentatively. In any case, a very large percentage of those unemployed would not be in work normally at this time of year owing to their occupations partaking of the nature of seasonal employment.

## Not Alarming at Present.

"At present, the situation in the Province, so far as one can judge, is not alarming. It may, of course, change rapidly."

That was as far as Mr. Joseph Ainey, general superintendent of the Province of Quebec's Free Employment Bureaux, would permit himself to go in the way of comment on the situation as a whole, when I discussed the unemployment question with him. Others, well placed for judging of the matter, agreed with him that the situation could not now be described as alarming, though they took the ground that it was very far from free from anxiety with regard to the immediate future. With regard to the possibility of rapid change in the situation, one such remarked that it was that which had to be feared especially. "It may develop fast," he said, "and, in fact, it already shows somewhat ominous signs of so developing. This is probably true of the county generally—at any rate, of its industrial centres—but it is especially true of Montreal."

Mr. Ainey was careful to point out that it is not within the province of his office to create work. Its function is to supply such demand as there may be for labor. It was out of his power to give, even approximately, any statistics as to the number unemployed in Montreal, or elsewhere, by reason of the fact that so many different bodies deal with the unemployment question. But he showed that the operations of his office in the five centres in the Province—Montreal, Quebec City, Sherbrooke, Hull and Three Rivers—where Free Employment Bureaux have been established under the aegis of the Provincial Government, have been, and are, doing much good.

As has been shown, however, the Provincial Bureaux only have before them a small part of the total volume of unemployment in the Province.

## Certain Ominous Signs.

There are one or two ominous signs about the present situation in Mont-

real. Some of the larger hotels report that they are literally being besieged by people wanting to be taken on as help. As this is a grade of labor for which the workers, as a rule, have little liking, this fact is not without its special significance. Again, the Provincial Bureaux have been recruiting men for lumbering companies. But the demand for labor for this purpose is now apparently sated. Heretofore, it has been difficult to get enough men. Further, there have been reductions of the staffs of both the C. P. R. and the G. T. R. though it is claimed by representatives of these roads that these reductions have not been to a very serious extent.

At other Quebec points, the situation is not generally very abnormal as yet, though a slackening off is making itself felt. There is not much to complain of at Sherbrooke. But at St. Hyacinthe, where the shoe industry is a big factor, there is a considerable amount of unemployment just now. Of Quebec city, where also the shoe industry looms large in the commercial life of the community, the same thing can be said, though, according to the information which reaches Mr. Ainey, reports as to the unemployment there which have reached the public have been exaggerated.

## Some Industries Need Help.

There are still some industries that need help. For instance certain textile concerns are applying for leave to import labor. Some of these need workers at \$15 and \$18 a week, and cannot get labor at that figure. At a meeting held at the Khaki Club in Montreal last Thursday, it was stated that Captain Morphy, of the Vocational branch of the Department of Soldiers' Civil Reestablishment, expressed the opinion, which was concurred in by the Salvation Army representative present, that men were far too anxious to select their jobs instead of taking the jobs that offered. And Mr. Doig, of the same Department related that it had been unable to fill an order for a hundred men for the Black Lake Asbestos Company.

"It is certainly the case", a well-known social worker in Montreal told me, "that a large number of workers in the boot and shoe, the clothing, the metal, and other industries are out of work. The trouble of it is that, in many cases, they will not leave the city and take jobs elsewhere. If the Federal, Provincial and municipal authorities will all engage in a co-ordinated effort to reduce and keep unemployment to a minimum, and if those out of work will take what offers in the way of work to tide over a difficult time, the industrial crisis will be surmounted without an appalling amount of hardship. Unemployment is a more serious factor today than it was formerly because the purchasing power of the dollar is so small. With regard to trade depression this is largely resultant from the fact that people who made and spent money freely during the war are not doing so today, partly because they are apprehensive as to the future, and partly because they are already pretty well supplied with clothing and other commodities."