

The Labour of Women and Children

Notwithstanding that all factory legislation and questions of wages contract and the like are matters for the legislatures of the several provinces, the present Liberal Government has never lost an opportunity to draw attention to the need for improvement in the conditions of the workers, and especially female and child labour where such has been apparent. The full investigation in 1897-98 into the methods by which Government contracts were being carried out, the outcome of which was the Fair Wages Resolution of the House of Commons already referred to, was in reality an inquiry into the Sweating System of which women and children were the main victims, and the result of that inquiry was not only to improve the conditions of the workers immediately concerned, but to give rise to a far-reaching agitation against the Sweating System itself.

Similarly when in 1907 it came to the notice of the Government that women employed in the exchanges of the Bell Telephone Company's offices at Toronto were being worked excessive hours, and subjected to too severe a strain, the Minister of Labour immediately recommended the appointment of a Royal Commission to inquire into the whole matter. Mr. Mackenzie King, the Deputy Minister of Labour, and His Honour Judge Winchester were appointed Commissioners, and they made a searching inquiry, which resulted not only in an immediate betterment of the conditions of employment of the operatives concerned, but in the accumulation of a mass of medical and other testimony and the publication of a report which have already had a strong influence in shaping public opinion in regard to the conditions which should prevail in this class of employment, and which cannot fail to lead to further legislation.

Similarly an investigation conducted under Royal Commission during the present summer by the Deputy Minister of Labour into conditions of employment in the cotton factories in the Province of Quebec, has brought to light many startling facts in regard to the employment of child labour in that industry and has resulted in an agitation throughout the province against the employment of children in factories, which is destined to have a wholesome and far-reaching effect. This is only one phase of the inquiry, the whole of which is deserving of special mention, but it serves to illustrate how unrelenting and many-sided have been the efforts of the present Liberal Administration to improve the conditions of employment, and better the lot of the industrial classes of this country.