

Provincial Labour and Industrial Conditions

Report of Deputy Minister of Labor, J. D. McNiven, Replete With Industrial Information of British Columbia for 1919—Review of Past Year's Activities.

The report of the Deputy Minister of Labor, Victoria, Mr. J. D. McNiven, for the year ending December 31, 1919, recently off the press of the King's Printer, is indeed a valuable document of comparative statistics of labor and industry in British Columbia. We commend it to the attention of our readers, it being of particular advantage to employers of labor. While covering industrial conditions in general its statistics for the year August 1, 1918, to July 31, 1919.

In addition to presenting a summary of conditions, a review of the Ottawa and Washington conferences, which the Deputy Minister attended as the British Columbia delegate, statistics of trade and industry in relation to labor for each class of trade, the report records the strikes of the year arranged in chronological order, with their results and effects on industry. (The report of the general strike of last June is particularly valuable.) The work of the employment bureau and the full report of the Minimum Wage Board, with appendices, and the Minimum Wage Act for women. A digest of some of these features of the report will be presented in future issues.

With regard to Mr. McNiven's review of labor and industrial conditions the report says:

The year 1919 was a period of many changes in the labor affairs of this Province, leading to unexampled situations which at times presented features of grave anxiety. The sudden cessation of hostilities towards the end of 1918, after more than four years of world-war, introduced a new condition of things entirely different, economically and industrially, from what obtained either during the period of the struggle or in the years that preceded it. In the early part of the year especially many thousands of soldiers were returning to the Province week by week, the great majority of them anxious to be absorbed in our industries with as little delay as possible. At the same time some trades which had owed their prosperity to war conditions now showed a slackening off, while others became more active. In the circumstances some amount of industrial disturbance was almost inevitable; but the atmosphere of unrest was intensified by a sudden cleavage in the ranks of organized labor, the putting forward of new claims in respect of wages and working conditions, and the frequent occurrence of strikes, culminating in the big industrial upheaval which brought many businesses to a standstill for several weeks in the middle of summer.

Probably no Province in Canada was more adversely affected by these events than British Columbia. For reasons referred to elsewhere, the Province has been called upon to look after many thousands more than her due proportion of returned soldiers; and though this has been a duty gladly accepted, the responsibility, falling most heavily at the time of the general strike, was felt to be something of a strain. Not only did the strike put a stop to many operations while it lasted, but, as will be seen from the special report on another page, its effects were felt for a long time afterward. At the end of the year the period of difficulty has not been passed, but the prospects are that 1920 will prove a more peaceful and prosperous year than its predecessor.

In dealing with the question of unemployment, an important part has been played by the Employment Bureaus operated by this Department. From one single Bureau existing in Vancouver City at the beginning of the year the system has grown until now there is a chain of offices established in almost every important city and town in the Province, receiving the requests of employer and workman and catering for the needs of both. The work of the Bureaus

will be more extensive in the coming year owing to the recent order making it illegal for private employment bureaus to be run on commercial lines. These private bureaus, while supplying in their day a real need, lent themselves at times to serious abuses; and their abolition was often asked for by workers, but could not be brought about until the machinery now provided by the Governmental Bureaus came into being.

It is hoped that the section of the report which presents "Statistics of Trades and Industries" will be found to be of value. The tables have been compiled from returns made by over 1,200 firms, to whom thanks are due for their courtesy in complying with the Department's requests for information. There are, however, a number of firms in the Province who have not so complied, and the absence of the information which they might have given is regretted, inasmuch as it leaves the report incomplete and weakens the force of any comparison between these figures and those of former and succeeding years. On three points, however, it is felt that a comparison with the figures of 1918 is pertinent. These are the rise in the general level of industrial wages, the reduction in the number of hours worked, and the marked increase in the number of Canadians and British workers employed, as against the reduced proportion of those of alien origin. The "Minimum Wage Act," affecting the wages of female employees, came into operation during the year. Already its effect is traceable in the figures given in the general tables, covering the period up to July 31st last, but the tendency is emphasized in the separate table which has been prepared more recently, dealing with the week ending December 13th.

The high cost of living shows little or no sign of abatement, and this has been a potent cause of unrest. It is well to remember, however, that the prevailing good prices are favorable in many ways to a producing country such as British Columbia is, and such as she might become on a very large scale with the steady application and industry of her people, together with greater cordiality in the relations of employer and employed. This in turn must be based upon honest service on the one hand, and, on the other, the highest wages and the best working conditions that an industry will stand. Given these things, our Province cannot fail to go strongly ahead. In the coming year the many industries founded upon our natural wealth of timber and minerals are expected to find steady employment. Agriculture and fishing also have a promising outlook, and the miscellaneous industries in our larger centres are looking forward to a good year. The one uncertain feature is ship-building. One of the largest yards in the Province was recently closed, but some of the others have orders on hand which will keep them busy for a considerable time to come.

Looking farther afield, brief reports will be found in subsequent pages relating to the National Industrial Conference at Ottawa in September last, and the League of Nations International Labor Conference held in Washington, U.S.A., in October and November.

The former Conference followed upon the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, which held sittings in various parts of Canada in the early part of the year. The Conference, in the main, agreed with the recommendations of that Commission. Both employer and employed were ably represented, and in the five days' sitting much was accomplished, the Conference giving a lead to both Dominion and Provincial Governments in the treatment of many questions touching the aspirations of labor and the needs of industry. Considering the divergence of views represented, the unanimity of some of the decisions were remarkable. On only three questions was division found to remain at the close of the Conference—those of the eight-hour day, collective bargaining, and the application of the findings of the Royal Commission to Government employees. The deci-