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MUNICIPAL ENGINEERING CONFERENCES

ONE of the most valuable functions of engineering societies is that of bringing the members together for fraternal intercourse,—of holding meetings where engineers can exchange ideas without restraint and under the mellowing influence of a pipe of tobacco and a cup of coffee.

Such meetings can be organized by any group, but for the moment we desire to emphasize the desirability of such conferences by the municipal engineers employed in the smaller towns and counties, because their vocation tends to deprive them of the opportunities that are open to men engaged in large centres. Municipal engineers are apt to become insular because they are separated by distance from others following the same profession. Municipal engineers are called upon to solve similar problems in their own special way, and the different solutions are often most instructive. Municipal engineers lose many opportunities for study because they have no distinctive section of any organized society to bring them together in visits to various engineering works. The opportunities which are thus lost to municipal engineers cannot be appraised in dollars and cents. Until after a few conferences are actually held, such meetings and visits cannot be fully appreciated as agencies for welding the municipal engineers into a really active organization.

Free, educative conferences would be welcomed to all cities and towns by the local authorities, and probably the smaller municipalities would afford as abundant opportunities for inspection, study and discussion as would the large cities.

Municipal engineers of the smaller cities and towns probably comprise sixty per cent. of the total number of

men so employed, and they would no doubt rejoice in meeting their brethren in the profession.

There appears to be a decided desire among engineers for greater recognition from the public. One way of attaining this object is to be ever present in the mind and vision of the people. Local conferences would undoubtedly help to create a healthy public appreciation of the services rendered by municipal engineers.

UNION WAGES AFTER THE WAR

IN a recent speech at Montreal, Mr. George L. Berry, general president of the International Printing Pressmen's and Assistants' Union, brought up a question that had been universally expected but which had not previously received much serious attention in Canada. Mr. Berry stated his belief that many employers already are planning to cut down wages after the war, and that workers should begin to prepare themselves to meet any new conditions that might arise.

If there is any movement on foot such as Mr. Berry suggests, it certainly is not of a very extensive kind. Probably not for a century has there been a time in Canadian industrial history when the outlook was more uncertain than it is just now, and manufacturers and other employers of labor are too busily engaged dealing with the problems of the present to make arrangements for a future period the conditions of which cannot be foreseen. The future depends upon how long the war lasts, the economic arrangements which are included in the peace terms and the internal developments which take place in our own country. In these events labor is interested just as much as is capital.

The rapid rise in the cost of living since 1914 has been accompanied by an increase in the wage scale in almost every occupation. With a very few exceptions, however, there is none in which the wages represent an increase in the power to purchase commodities. The reverse is in fact the case, and in this way the wage earner who does not contribute through the income tax, corporation tax, etc., has been required to bear his share of the cost of the war. If prices retain their level fairly well after the war and business activity is fairly good, the present wage scale will undoubtedly be maintained. On the other hand, if prices decline to any extent, as is expected, labor interests must recognize the fact that their remuneration will be reduced accordingly. The argument of increasing cost of living has been universally used in advocating wage increases, and workers must be prepared to accept the argument of declining prices as sufficient cause for wage reductions.

Mr. Berry stated that the membership of the union would fight to the bitter end any attempt on the part of the employers to reduce wages and that it is a patriotic duty to keep wages high. No doubt he had in mind the continuance of the present cost of living and industrial activity. If these factors alter, however, and wages should accordingly reduce, employees have no cause for complaint unless the reductions be made with undue haste. It is ordinarily the case that during a period of rising prices the wage earner is at a disadvantage because prices and industrial profits increase more rapidly than does the remuneration of labor. In other words, the wage earner is always a little behind. On the other hand, it is supposed that during a period of falling prices he has the advantage because it is harder to reduce wages, which are fixed more or less by custom and agreement, than it is for prices to fall in the open market of supply and demand.