

Wages and What They Buy; Munition Workers' Earnings

What Metal Trades are Paid in Toronto — Question of Minimum Wage.

H. Gordon Selfridge, proprietor of one of the great London department stores, is quoted in a recent magazine article as saying: "The reason for the growth in retail trade is that the workers are getting very high wages, and that they are now raising their standard of living. But the more prosperous middle-class people have mostly curtailed their scale of living. They are giving up what the munition workers are gaining. Their income and profits have been reduced, their taxes have been increased, and they are feeling the cost of the war. In our stores we are selling a great many pianos to families who have dreamed for years of being able to buy them. But these are not new pianos; they are second-hand, coming from the homes of the middle-class, often sold to provide funds to buy war bonds."

This does not apply in its entirety to Canada. The income tax is not nearly so burdensome here as there. Probably very few people have stinted themselves to buy war bonds to the extent of selling their pianos. Nevertheless, a comparison between Canada and England in regard to wage conditions holds true to this measurable extent: The munition workers of Canada, where organized, are in many cases better off than before the war, despite the increased cost of living. Unorganized employes, on the other hand, such as clerks, drivers, school teachers, and others, as well as the more loosely organized trades, find whatever increase they have received inadequate to meet the advance in their expenses.

METAL TRADES HAVE BENEFITED LARGELY.

Among organized trades the metal industries have perhaps benefited by reason of war conditions to a larger extent than any others, and are in a better condition to cope with the 60 per cent. increase in living costs. These trades are vital to the production of munitions, and have been able to demand and secure very favorable wages. There are men engaged in them who frankly refuse to state what they are being paid—top-notchers who wish to excite no jealousies among their fellows, and only smile wisely when their wages are mentioned. And some employers are just as reluctant to state what they pay the best men of this type. Publication of the figures, they think, would affect the general labor market. It is known, however, that outside of these exceptional cases there are metal-workers in Toronto who are being paid 70 and 75 cents per hour when the union wage is only 55 cents. In some trades, indeed, the majority of the organized workers are getting more than the minimum wage. Conditions before the war contributed to a paradoxical situation; the minimum union wage was the maximum wage. To-day, with skilled labor scarce where it used to be plentiful, the minimum union wage is, as often as not, exceeded.

MACHINISTS ARE BEING WELL PAID.

As an instance, the case of the organized machinists may be cited. Before the war they were getting 27½ cents, and toolmaker machinists about 32½ cents. To-day the minimum union rate for this trade is 55 cents, or just double the pre-war wages. But the majority in Toronto apparently receive more like 60 cents per hour, while toolmakers are getting 70 and some 75 cents. These men have improved their condition during the war.

It must be remembered, however, that in all such trades as this the present minimum union wage is that which must ultimately compare with the pay received prior to the war. That minimum may be largely exceeded to-day, but it may at any time become the maximum if a period of depression follows the signing of peace. Anything which is earned above this minimum may prove only a temporary gain, and the fact that such a gain enables workmen to live on a scale which the existing minimum would not provide would make it all the harder for them to return to their previous scale of living were they dependent once more upon minimum wages, with the cost of living as at present.

This, however, suggests another aspect of the case, and one which worries employers as well as employes. What will happen to the cost of living after the war? If abnormal wages cease to be paid will abnormal prices for manufactured and other goods decline with equal rapidity? This problem is at the back of the mind of nearly every employer to-day. Just over the hill is the end of the war, and with no certainty can anyone speculate upon what conditions may then arise. Certainly there must be a vast reorganization when the nations of the world beat their swords into pruning hooks.

WAGES IN OTHER METAL TRADES.

In the meantime, munition workers are paid large wages, as compared with what they received before the war. Pattern-makers, who used to get 27½ cents to 42 cents, have lately been getting a minimum of 57½ cents, which is somewhat under the 60 per cent. advance in cost of living. Now, however, the rate is being fixed at 65 cents, and the majority of men are getting that, while some are paid 70 cents. Moulders, who in 1912 were paid \$3.10 per day in Toronto, have been getting a minimum of \$4.50, and are now on strike for \$6.00. Blacksmiths were in receipt of 31 cents per hour before the war; and now have a minimum of 50 cents in organized shops, with the majority earning 55 and some paid 70 cents. Their helpers, who got about 25 cents in 1912, have now a minimum of 35, most get 40 and some 45.

Thus the story runs; and according as a man is above the average in skill or industry, or has the capacity and desire to work long hours—to that extent is he earning an abnormal wage. But when a trades unionist is confronted with abnormal earnings, his reply is usually this: "The minimum wage is the only one which it is fair to compare with before-the-war earnings, because it is to the minimum wage and ordinary hours of employment that we must fall back if labor becomes plentiful, or if trade becomes dull after the war." It all goes to show that conditions after the war are very much present to the minds of all men who have to consider the question of "wages and what they buy."