

in their rates of wages. The year indeed may well prove a test of the value of applying the Wage Act machinery to native conditions of employment. It will be, for example, of distinct interest to learn whether the workers in Bloemfontein appear to respond in working and living habits to the increases granted, whether the municipality is able to prevent any excess of native immigration due to the attraction of improved wages, and whether the Bloemfontein standards are followed elsewhere.

Conditions of Aborigines in Australia

In the latter part of 1928 an enquiry into the status and conditions of aborigines, including half-castes, in Central and North Australia was carried out under instructions from the Commonwealth Government by Mr. J. W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Queensland. The report¹ embodying the results of the enquiry, which was submitted to Parliament in 1929, contains some interesting information and recommendations concerning the employment of aborigines.

The estimated aboriginal population of North and Central Australia is 21,000, including 800 half-castes.² Of this total, the able-bodied in regular or casual employment (2,500), together with their dependants (1,500), number 4,000. There are some 3,000 aborigines who are either living in Aboriginal Institutions or have some contact with such Institutions, while the remaining 14,000 are grouped in nomadic tribes.

With regard to the 2,500 regular or casual workers the principal avenues of employment are : (1) domestic and labouring employment in towns ; (2) domestic and stock work on cattle stations ; (3) labouring work with sleeper cutters, buffalo hunters, teamsters, etc.; (4) boat or shore work with trepang fishers ; but quite 80 per cent. of the labour is absorbed by the cattle stations.

WAGES

"Those in domestic service in town, being under more direct supervision, enjoy better conditions than their countrymen in bush employment, receiving food, clothes and a wage of usually 5s. per week, of which 3s. is paid to them as pocket money and 2s. is banked in trust account for them. Where the contract to supply food and

¹ PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA : *The Aborigines and Half-Castes of Central Australia and North Australia*. Report by J. W. BLEAKLEY, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Queensland, 1928. Melbourne, Govt. Printer, 1929. 65 pp., illustr. 3s. 6d.

² The total aboriginal population of Australia is estimated at 60,000.

clothing is fairly fulfilled the wage of 5s. per week may be regarded as reasonable remuneration for the average servant. But some of these servants, especially the half-castes, are worth more than the average, and the regulation rate of 5s. per week should be used as a minimum and not a fixed rate, the more capable servants being paid according to their real value.

"A few bush labourers, such as sleeper cutters' assistants, employed near the railway line, receive 10s. per week, but in the country, by payment of a licence fee of 10s. per annum, an employer is entitled to employ an unlimited number of aboriginals without payment on condition that those employed are clothed and fed and reasonable shelter is provided for them. The licence stipulates that any permanently employed shall be paid a wage of 5s. per week, of which the Protector may collect 10s. per month to be banked in the trust account to each native's credit. As employers on pastoral holdings have claimed that many more natives have to be fed than are employed by them, the payment of wages has not been insisted upon, at any rate in North Australia.

"In Central Australia a number of stations claim that in place of the licence rates of 5s. per week with food and clothes for permanent employees, they pay from 10s. to £1 per week to men and 5s. per week to women, supplying food only, the natives buying their own clothes, tobacco, etc. A few stations on the Barkly Tableland also pay higher rates to their more capable employees, who receive and handle their earnings in a similar manner.

"As one result of this system they frequently waste their money, leaving their dependants to seek Government relief. It was urged that there should be more official control of their earnings."

LIVING CONDITIONS

The report states that although it is one of the conditions of employment that reasonable shelter shall be provided for all natives employed, this condition was in many cases not fulfilled. The explanation given was that the natives prefer to live near their relatives in the camp and in the same primitive conditions. Mr. Bleakley considered, however, that ample evidence was available that the young natives, at any rate, will occupy civilised shelters of a comfortable type if provided.

"While fully recognising the impossibility of lifting the native worker in one step to the social plane of the whites it is fairly generally admitted that his present condition could be greatly improved. This is not only due to him, as a right, for his own comfort and health while confined to the place of employment, but is highly desirable in the interests of the health of the employer, his family and white staffs, who depend entirely upon the people from these camps for the domestic services of the homestead."

FOOD, SYSTEM OF PAYMENT, ETC.

The condition of the contract to supply food, clothes, and tobacco to the workers appears generally to be satisfactorily observed. In

most of the places inspected the working natives seemed to be well nourished and decently clothed. No evidence of serious ill-treatment was seen. It had been alleged that the natives on stations were practically in a state of peonage, but employers all held that if a native does not want to work it is useless trying to coerce him into doing so.

"One fact, however, is universally admitted, that the pastoral industry in the Territories is absolutely dependent upon the blacks for the labour, domestic and field, necessary to carry on successfully. If they were removed, most of the holdings, specially the smaller ones, would have to be abandoned.

"It is remarkable that, although recognising their absolute dependence upon the natives, there has been no attempt made by the people of these holdings to elevate or educate them, though this should enhance their value. . . . Though any suggestion of improving the living conditions and wages of the young working natives is met by the objection that the industry cannot stand any increase in the cost of production, it is noted that, while some stations pay only with food and clothes and others pay permanent hands the regulation 5s. per week, several seen in Central Australia claim to be paying from 10s. to £1 a week with food only.

"The system which leaves the matter of reward for the labour entirely in the hands of the employer is not an equitable one.

"The most satisfactory arrangement would be one in which a definite scale of payment is fixed for permanent workers according to the value of their respective services.

"A sliding scale up to £1 per week, with the present regulation rate of 5s. as a minimum, would appear to be reasonable, especially as several stations claim to be already paying equal rates.

"Although it is the practice in town districts and on a few stations near the towns to give weekly pocket money, it is generally condemned, as the native invariably uses it foolishly. . . . Very few natives understand the use of money or values of articles and are easily defrauded by the unscrupulous trader. . . . A system by which the native is credited with the wages earned and allowed to draw against this credit to a certain limit for the assistance of his family and relatives, the accounts being as frequently as possible examined and verified by the Protector, and a deduction of 20 per cent. treated as reserve pay and remitted to the Protector for banking to his credit in trust account, would be the most suitable in his present circumstances."

LIVING CONDITIONS AND EDUCATION OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

The report recommends that an attempt should be made to improve the living conditions of the younger generation.

"There is ample evidence that most of the young people, especially those born and trained on the place, would gladly adapt themselves to better conditions if provided or even if given the means to provide them for themselves. . . . Reasonable arrangements for such necessary matters as water supply and sanitary services can be made. . . . The discouragements usual in any similar reforms

are sure to be met with at first, but firmness, mixed with human sympathy, will tide over the difficulties. The improvement in the health and mentality of the people and the lessening of the present serious risks of infection in the employer's household will doubtless soon manifest themselves and repay the trouble and expense."

Alluding to the difficult problem of the education of the young children—the stockmen and servants of the future—Mr. Bleakley says that he found that the desirability of educating aboriginal children was often contested.

"It is argued that education spoils them, making them cunning and cheeky. The trouble probably is that they become intelligent and, as a result, dissatisfied with conditions. The right education, with improved working and living conditions, should make for better service, but it would be useless attempting to supply the first without the other."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion of the section of the report dealing with employed aboriginals recommends that amended regulations should be framed, providing :

- (1) For a definite scale of wages for permanent workers according to value of services ;
- (2) That, as far as possible, cash payments direct to natives be discontinued, and wages be drawn in goods, as required, through the employers or the local Protector ;
- (3) For the deduction of a percentage of the native's earnings for compulsory saving ;
- (4) For the provision of better living conditions for permanent employees.