

CHAPTER II

THE STATE MACHINE BEFORE THE WAR

THE history of labour supply and regulation during the War is largely the history of a gigantic improvisation under the aegis of a newly-created State machine. In order to realize the magnitude both of the problem and the changes in State organization required to meet it, some description is necessary of the machine in existence for handling labour questions before the War.

To the careful observer, the outstanding fact with regard to this question in pre-war time is the absence of any single authority either charged with the administration of the Government labour code or with any general supervision of that code. The Government impinged upon the labour problem from two distinct points of view. In the first place it represented the general conscience of the community in the matter of social reforms intended to elevate and improve the life of the workman. On the other hand, it appeared as a direct employer of labour in such branches of activity as the production of guns, rifles, and shells at Woolwich Arsenal and Enfield, and of warships at the dockyards. Under the first head the Government had assumed an increasingly heavy burden from the days when the Factory Acts indicated a definite break with the theory of *laissez faire*. From that time forward, and with increasing intensity during the early years of the present century, the Government found itself called upon to interfere with the normal relations of employers and employed and to a certain extent with the management of businesses. The Acts passed to meet the changing needs of the time were not necessarily passed by the same Government and were not necessarily part of one general scheme. It was not surprising, therefore, that different Departments were charged with the administration of various parts of the code often rather by accident than by design.

It happened accordingly that there were three Departments all vitally interested in labour questions and not necessarily working in close accord, except so far as the ministerial heads