STATISTICS OF CONVICT LABOR: ADVANCED CHAPTERS FROM THE 4TH BIENNIAL REPORT BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS OF THE STATE ILLINOIS

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STATISTICS

OF

CONVICT LABOR.

ADVANCED CHAPTERS FROM THE

FOURTH BIENNIAL REPORT

OF THE

BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

OF THE

STATE OF ILLINOIS.

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CONVICT LABOR.

INTRODUCTORY.

The following joint resolution was passed at the close of the session of the XXXIV General Assembly of Illinois:

"*Resolved by the Senate, the House of Representatives concurring herein,* That there be submitted to the people of the State of Illinois, for their ratification or rejection at the next general election for members of the General Assembly, the following additional amendment to the Constitution:

"*Resolved,* That hereafter it shall be unlawful for the commissioners of any penitentiary or other reformatory institution in the State of Illinois to let by contract to any person or persons, or corporations, the labor of any convict confined within said institution."

This resolution was the final fruit of a prolonged contest in both houses over various bills to abolish the so-called contract system of labor in the penal institutions of the State.

There had been during this session of the legislature thirteen different bills presented in the two houses, all having for their object the reorganization of the labor systems of the two penitentiaries, on some basis other than that of the contract system. Nine of these bills were introduced in the House of Representatives, and were rejected by the committee to which they were referred. One of them was, however, taken up in spite of the recommendation of the committee, and pushed to its final passage in the House and forwarded to the Senate.

This bill was duly considered and advanced in the Senate, but in the last hours of the session failed to receive the two-thirds vote necessary to take it up out of its order for final action, and consequently did not become a law.

During the same session four bills of a similar character had originated in the Senate. One of these had also been finally passed by that body, and was submitted to the House, but was there defeated.

After the many close divisions on this question, which arose in the course of the deliberations upon these various bills, it was not difficult for both houses to unite upon a proposition to submit the issue direct to the consideration and vote of the people.

The foregoing joint resolution was accordingly framed, providing for the submission to a popular vote of the proposition to so amend the constitution of the State as to prohibit in future the making of contracts for the labor of convicts. This was introduced in the Senate and received the approval of that body by a vote of 49 to 1; and afterwards being referred to the House, it was there concurred in by a vote of 119 to 9.

This action has brought the subject of prison labor directly before the people, who will be called upon at the next election for members of the General Assembly to declare their wishes in regard to the continuance of the present system.

There are in the two penitentiaries of Illinois 2,308 convicts, of whom all but 34 are male adults; and in the Reform School 312 boys, making in all 2,620 inmates of these three institutions. Of this number 2,565 are at work, and of these 1,873 are at work under the contract system, as follows: 1,304 at Joliet, 410 at Chester, and 159 at Pontiac.

The contracts under which they are employed have been made for terms varying in duration, under the law which instructs the commissioners to let the labor of convicts "for such periods as they may deem advisable, not exceeding eight years." By virtue of this act the contracts now in force have for the most part been made for the longest period permitted, and the more important contracts have been so recently made or renewed that they cannot expire for a number of years. The exact situation in this regard in the penitentiaries is as follows:

Contracts for	25	men	expire in	1886.
"	267	"	"	1887.
"	305	"	"	1889.
"	350	"	"	1890.
"	472	"	"	1892.
"	295	"	"	1894.

In other words, 292 will be released under existing contracts in about one year, 305 in about two years, 350 in three years, or 947 in