

HOUSE.....No. 52.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, Feb. 22d, 1843.

The Special Committee, to whom was referred the petition of Luther Munn and two thousand four hundred and seven others, inhabitants of Massachusetts, together with the petitions of Eliphaz Chapin and five hundred others, citizens of Quincy; of Thomas F. Woodbury and others, inhabitants of Boston; and of Iram Vinton and seventy-seven others, citizens of Braintree and Weymouth, praying that certain branches of labor, in the State Prison, affecting the business of the petitioners, may be considered, and some remedy applied,

REPORT:

That they have given an attentive hearing to Mr. Munn and several other persons who appeared before them to represent the petitioners, and to offer statements respecting the disadvantages experienced by those employed in the various branches of manufactures and mechanic arts, specified in the petitions, in consequence of the more favorable circumstances under which the same kinds of business are conducted at the State Prison.

It was stated to the committee, that the petitioners, with a few exceptions, are men who depend on their daily wages for

their support; that a large portion of them cannot find employment in their respective trades; and that others are compelled to work at such reduced prices, as occasion embarrassment and distress. This state of things is ascribed, by the petitioners, in a great degree, to the constant labor of a large number of convicts in the State Prison, and in the neighboring Houses of Correction, in the several trades of the petitioners; since the articles manufactured in these institutions must be sold, even if remunerating prices cannot be obtained.

Although the committee have not the *data*, and could not procure them and arrange them, so as to come to any satisfactory results in detail, respecting *the degree* to which the citizens employed in manufactures and mechanic arts, are unfavorably affected by the labor of convicts in such manufactures and arts, yet they have no doubt of the injurious effects to some extent; particularly, and to an increased extent, in times of general depression in business, like the present.

In this case, as in many others, the evil is much more obvious than the remedy. The petitioners, in their appeal to the Legislature, ask "Whether it is the duty of the Commonwealth thus to sacrifice, in any degree, the industry of its honest and deserving citizens, for the sake of the trifling saving to the public, of the expense of supporting the vicious and profligate individuals, who ought to be punished in some mode, which shall not, at the same time, operate as a punishment on the innocent and industrious members of the community."

This question opens the whole matter of prison discipline, which the committee regard as a subject too grave and difficult to enter upon, without much more time, and a much better opportunity for investigation, than any committee can command during a single session of the Legislature. The committee would carefully avoid giving any countenance to expressions of dissatisfaction with the present system of discipline in the State Prison, until it can be demonstrated that it can be superseded by a better system.

The committee, however, are of opinion, that the Legislature should earnestly recommend to the inspectors of the State Prison, and to those who have the direction of the internal affairs

of the Houses of Correction, so to modify or vary the labor employed in those institutions, as to conflict as little as possible with the labor of citizens employed in the different branches of manufactures and mechanic arts.

The committee have seen, within a few days, an abstract of a report made to the inspectors of the Auburn Prison, by their agent, announcing the favorable result of the experiment commenced in May, 1841, of employing convicts in the manufacture of silk. The agent expresses his opinion that, "the business may be so extended as ultimately to employ all the convict labor which can be assigned to it, consistently with a proper conduct and management of the prison." The number employed has been increased from two to forty convicts, and the proceeds of the labor amount to a sum which gives thirty-four cents and six mills a day for each convict.

Although the committee are not prepared to propose any definite action on the prayer of the petitioners, yet they regard it as worthy of the serious consideration of the Legislature, and therefore recommend, that the several petitions enumerated in the beginning of this report, be referred to the next General Court.

Respectfully submitted by

SIDNEY WILLARD, *Chairman.*

