

THE CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS.

The Chairman then said it was their usual custom that something should be said upon the various questions they were called together to consider, and he felt sure that in the exceptional circumstances under which they had met he should receive the indulgence and sympathetic support of the Conference while he made a few observations upon some of the points raised in their programme. As Mr. Pickard rightly said, it was impossible that the Conference could be held at a more critical period in the history of the mining industry. But there was an appropriateness in the peculiar time at which they had met. First of all, they knew that many questions on their programme dealing with matters that were considered to be legislative, and again they knew that the coal trade was now at one of its most critical periods, especially in respect of what had taken place in several counties in Great Britain during the last fortnight or three weeks. During their deliberations, no doubt, they should have something to say on both these questions, but before referring to these he thought it would be very opportune to review their position as a Federation. Great changes had taken place during the last twelve months, and he was pleased to find from the Credential Committee's report, given yesterday, that great progress had taken place during this period, both in regard to membership and to the financial position of the districts represented. When they reviewed their position during the short period of something like four years, the rapid progress they had made afforded matter for the deepest congratulation. It was in 1888 that they

first shook hands at Manchester, in very peculiar circumstances, and at a time when the coal trade was in its most depressed condition. At that time, those who took part in the formation of the Federation would remember they had no more than 36,000 members. Organization at that time was its lowest ebb. When they met a year later at Newport they found their membership had increased to 96,000. Twelve months later in January, 1890, they met at Birmingham and found they had still further additions to make to their already increased membership. At that time they had 101,000 members. In January last year they had a membership of something like 147,195, and yesterday, according to the report of the Credential Committee, they had a still further increase of membership to the extent of 178,513, showing that during the last year they had increased in membership something like 31,318. This was a matter for congratulation. There was, however, another aspect of their position which they ought not to forget. Numerical strength was something to go by. Large numbers gave an association great weight; but they believed that an organization with no sound fund behind it was of little weight in these days, when capital was so strongly organized. They had determined that they would not simply be an organization of large numbers, but had been concentrating their efforts during the last three or four years to get strong defence funds in connection with their associations, and he felt sure that to-day if their capital was all put together, they would find that in their various associations they had very little short of half a million of money. Well, now, that was really something to be proud of, and he thought such a statement as that, such a roll-call to begin with, was a matter for congratulation, and should inspire them with a stronger desire to press forward during the year upon which they had just entered with determination and energy, so that the remaining fragments still outside the pale of association might be gathered in, in order that their army may become more complete, and their hand become more powerful. (Hear, hear.) They had a very lengthy programme, dealing with a number of the most vital questions, and it would take all the time and tact that could be brought to bear to get through it with anything like justice to the programme itself. It might strike every gentleman present that there was one question left out of the programme and that was perhaps the greatest question that a conference of the kind could be brought to consider. At the time the programme was drawn up he believed, it was intended, in fact it was not necessary because there had not been sufficient change in the state of trade on the rate of wages, to justify a discussion on that point. But they had observed from the public Press during the past three weeks that most vital changes had taken place in their own industry, and he contended that the public attention should be centred more upon one question than any other that affected them. He referred to the wages question. (Hear, hear.) They had been taunted in the public press and almost challenged, and he thought it was only right that some expression of opinion should come from that Conference

on the situation of the wages question and the price of coal. (Hear, hear.) Referring to the South Wales Association, he said they had not a word to say against it, and he did not know that they had any reason to pry into their private business, but they had got to such a pitch in their history that it was impossible for a large section of the mining population to be affected without interfering with the position of some members of the organisation. Their South Wales friends as they all well knew had in a most humiliating manner submitted to a reduction, almost amounting to ten per cent. in their wages, and he thought they could not feel anything but amused when they saw the different stages the question had taken while it had been under consideration. When they looked at the humiliating vacillation of the men and the enormous adjournments that had been made, and then looked at the total collapse of the men's position, he thought it would appear to most of them as a most abject position. (Hear, hear.) South Wales had an organisation, or rather a semblance of an organisation. They had an organisation simply in numbers, and he was very sorry to find from repeated statements that in consequence of the absence of vitality the South Wales Association had to succumb to the terms of the employers. During the last five months, since the employers gave notice terminating the existing scale, they might have seen that their friends in South Wales first intended to make some strong contentions and insist on the most radical reform of the scale and that one question more than another should be inquired into, and that was the payment on small coal. They had since discovered that the contention had been absolutely withdrawn in order that they might be bound hand and foot by another scale. That scale was declared in 1889 by their leaders to be rotten, and it was now still more rotten than ever. They had members in their Federation who would be affected by that decision, and had the South Wales people listened to the Committee of the Federation they might have saved themselves. The Committee asked them to endeavour to prevent that reduction taking place, but from the course they assumed they were now put in their present humiliating position. It was a matter to feel proud of to find their Monmouth friends, and others in the locality, stoutly refusing to sell their liberty and become mere vassals in the hands of the employers. They would be called upon to consider that question that day, and he felt sure that the Conference would agree to rally around them substantially, and by giving them financial support to maintain their independence as they desired it. (Hear, hear.) But there were other districts besides South Wales. There was Northumberland, and they deeply regretted to see that they acquiesced in a reduction of five per cent. They also found that Durham had this question under consideration. It was a serious thing for the Federation to decide as to their present and future procedure. They would give the question the fullest discussion, and gentlemen around the table would be prepared to give it the closest attention and show that their position was very little affected by the surrounding changes which had taken place. As to what their position and relationships in respect to the matter was, well they did not

believe in sliding scales. (Applause.) They had pledged their word and honour, and had determined that so long as their organisation existed they would have nothing to do with sliding scales. They were prepared to maintain their own independence, to depend on their own strong hand and their own right arm. By this he meant their unfettered agitation, which had done so much good during the past three or four years in this country. Well, what was their position? First of all, they said that on this question of wages there was scarcely the slightest analogy between their Federation and the districts affected by these reductions. He would refer to the understanding which they arrived at some eighteen months ago, when some gentlemen around their table met the South Wales delegates, to see whether they could arrange an amalgamation between that great country and the Federation. Well, they could not come to any amalgamation, and they would remember the points on which they differed. They, the Federation, said that from the standard of competition, from the geological position of South Wales, Durham, and Northumberland, there was scarcely any analogy between these districts and their Federation. In the second place, they had a strong belief that one of the greatest agents in encouraging the reduction in the price of coal had been the sliding scale system, and the understanding that existed between some of these counties and their employers. They had no such understanding with their organisation. They had had pointed out to them the fact that in all their districts, during the last twelve months especially, large contracts of coal had been put on the pit banks, and they were told that slack was a drug on the market, and that their employers could scarcely give it away. In consequence of this consideration they were informed there was a depression in trade. What force was there in these contentions? What weight was there in these arguments? Was there any depression in trade? He failed to see where it was. If they examined the output during the past four years they would see that in 1887 the output was 162,000,000 tons, in 1883 169,000,000 tons, in 1889 176,000,000 tons, and in 1890-91 181,000,000 tons, or during the last four years an increase in production of coal of something over 19,000,000 tons, and during the last year an increase over the preceding one of something like 5,000,000 tons. In the face of questions of that kind they said that the fact that coal was placed on the pit bank was not the result of any depression, but was simply the consequence of the extraordinary facilities employers had brought to bear in increasing the production of coal during recent years. In the Midland counties, though there was no pledge, he thought there was a kind of indistinct understanding, and they held it as a matter of life and death that any condition of trade ought to warrant the working man living. They held that it was a vital principle that a man by his labour should live, and notwithstanding all the teachings of political economists, all the doctrines taught by way of supply and demand, they said there was a greater doctrine overriding all these, and that was the doctrine of humanity. They believed that the working man was worthy of his hire, and held at the present moment

that wages were as low as they ever ought to be. They knew that while wages were supposed to be in a prosperous condition, in numerous districts, and Lancashire especially, there were thousands of men who were working for very ordinary wages, and that notwithstanding the high price of coal and the high wages in various other counties. That being so, this Federation had by the force of its organisation, and by the assistance, perhaps, of the more honourable of the employers, succeeded in the past four years in forcing wages to where they were at present. They were determined, as far as in them lay, they would never allow wages to go down in order to gratify the selfishness of some of the employers, who were always ready and willing to undersell their friends, other employers. Some employers, they were told, had been making contracts with railway companies at a greatly reduced rate. He was pleased the other day to see a suggestion made by Mr. Pickard, and was further pleased to notice that their Yorkshire employers had taken this suggestion to heart, and that on the sixth of this month they held a meeting to consider it. He felt quite sure, as far as their conference was concerned, they would give the employers all the assistance and support they possibly could in trying to carry out the suggestion made at that meeting. What were those proposals? One was that, in order to maintain present prices and wages, they would suggest that there should be a restriction in the time worked at their collieries; that the men should be advised to work five days during the week to keep down the reduction, and keep prices good. There was another proposal that where employers were known to have gone and secured contracts at a lower rate with railway companies they should advise the workmen to go in for a large advance of wages in order to show their strong objection to and protest against their conduct in going and underselling other employers in the market. On these two proposals he felt sure they were willing to work hand in hand with the employers in trying to maintain the present prices with the Midland counties of England. (Cheers.) Of course, this was a great question, and a matter on which some of them were burning to express themselves during this Conference, and it was this question more than any other, and the time and circumstances under which they met, which made this so grave and critical a period. (Hear, hear.) There was another very important matter on the programme, and that was the Eight Hours Bill. The question had been fully and lengthily discussed in all the districts. Miners understood all the varied phases of the question. They had seen every form of objection raised against the Bill, and notwithstanding this the Bill had made progress. They felt sure that as it became better known, and as the points of the Bill were better understood, they would get a large amount of support from members of Parliament and candidates for Parliament. He was pleased to say that within the last fortnight two candidates in Lancashire—one engaged in fighting a desperate battle for Lord Hartington's seat, and the other who was standing for the Newton division—had pledged themselves not only to the Eight Hours Bill, but to the payment of members, and the making

of the Employers' Liability Bill compulsory. This showed that they were gaining ground. They knew that no man who was free from prejudice, and who thoroughly understood the dangers of the miners would for one moment contend that they were not justified in having the Bill passed into law. (Hear, hear.) The Committee had decided to take certain steps during the forthcoming year to secure a discussion in the House of Commons. Last year, they remembered, they were hampered on every hand, and though the Government was besieged day and night it refused to give even a Saturday afternoon for the discussion of the Bill. They refused to give the opportunity because they were afraid of their deeds coming to light, and not only did this apply to the Government, but to the rank and file of the members of Parliament, as if the discussion had gone on the miners would have been able to see who were their friends who were their enemies, and this is what they (the miners) had been wanting all along. He felt that as the general election approached, they would find a much larger number of members and candidates prepared to support their Bill. (Hear, hear.) They had decided to seek the co-operation of other trades on this matter, and he felt sure, from the unanimity with which they got support at the recent Trades Union Congress, that when they sent out circulars to the trades the latter would give their moral and influential support. They had also decided to petition Parliament—he did not know what virtue there was in petitions—and were determined to leave no stone unturned to make this bill an accomplished fact at the earliest opportunity. (Hear, hear.) There was another important matter on the programme on which they would be rather divided, which would occupy their most serious consideration, and leaving selfishness or other motive on one side, which they would have to decide. He referred to the payment of returning officers' Fees. They believed, he thought, in that body that there was a great necessity for labour members of Parliament—(Cheers)—and he was sure they would discuss without prejudice and decide at this Conference and lay down for all times a vital principle which would be a great service to the different sections which composed this Federation. There were a large number of other questions coming up for discussion, and knowing as he did the practical knowledge and ability of a great many of the gentlemen around the table, he was sure that these matters would be considered in a sober, able, and sensible manner. In conclusion, the Chairman said that Mr. Pickard, in his letter, hoped that this would be one of the most successful Conferences they had ever held. He hoped with their Chairman that the coming would be a prosperous new year, like the one that had preceded it. He hoped that there would be nothing in the shape of a conflict with capital; that wages would be maintained; and that the employers would show a disposition to co-operate with them in keeping wages in a more settled condition. They were strongly averse to the fluctuations which took place between wages and prices. He hoped that this Conference would mark a step forward, and that all they did would command a hearty

support and co-operation, and good wishes of the many thousands whom they represented.

VOTE OF THANKS TO THE CHAIRMAN.