

THE CHAIRMAN'S OPENING ADDRESS.

Gentlemen,—We are met here this morning as the representatives of the miners of the United Kingdom. Probably in the history of the whole of the mining agitations we have not had a more important, or more representative Conference than that which is assembled here this morning. The decisions, therefore, which will be come to at this Conference, will no doubt be of a most important character, not only to the men that we represent but also to the public outside, because the miners have now attained such gigantic proportions in the matter of their organisations, that they command public opinion in such a manner perhaps, as they never did in their past history. Now there is one thought that I should like to give expression to, and it is this—it is a very regrettable circumstance that, although we have made rapid progress in the past, though we have improved the position of the men that we represent very materially, both with regard to their safety, with regard to their *locus standi* in the country, and in the improvement of their financial position, we have not yet arrived at that state of unanimity which we desire upon all the great questions which are so dear and of such great interest to the men whom we represent. That is a regrettable circumstance. I deeply regret that we cannot here to-day say that we are agreed upon all the important questions that we are met to discuss. However, we must hope for better things in the future,

and perhaps the time will soon arrive when we shall be perfectly unanimous. Although we may not be able to see eye to eye with each other on every question, yet, I think we shall be able, by maturing our opinions, to be thoroughly united in the great propaganda that we have placed before the country. Now we have here this morning a very elaborate programme. Four questions to be found in this programme are of the greatest interest. The first is the subject of the Eight Hours working day from bank to bank. This question has, I think, been considered in all its bearings. From the various points of view almost everything which was possible has been said upon this great question. There are those among us who believe that the speediest and most permanent way to reduce the hours of labour in our mines, which in some parts of the country we know are far too long—that the surest way is to get the hours reduced throughout the country by legislative enactment. There are those amongst us—I am sorry, of course, that there should be this difference of opinion, but they are entitled to their own opinions—who think otherwise, who believe that the Eight Hours working day, or the shortening of the hours of labour in mines, could be better accomplished by our own organisation. That is the great question we shall have to discuss. There is one feature of this question which no one can deny, that is, that since the Eight Hours question was promulgated and brought prominently before the country, it has made more headway and more progress in the same space of time, than any other social or economic question affecting any other class of industry. When we remember that in the early part of last year we were sufficiently successful to get a debate upon this question in the House of Commons, we have cause for self-congratulation. I think the division list showed that our progress had been beyond our most sanguine expectations. When we consider, gentlemen, the largeness of the vote we obtained in the House, and the powerful way in which the question was brought before the electors in all the Divisions where miners live, I think we may fairly anticipate in the near future, that [the Miners' Eight Hours Bill will soon become an accomplished fact. You know that other classes of the community are considering this question. We are not so much concerned in this Conference about the general eight hours bill, in fact we have drawn our lines clearly and distinctly. This Conference, or rather the majority of this Conference I ought to say, because we always respect the opinions of our friends who may choose to differ from us, has exercised such a powerful influence upon public opinion that there is scarcely any class of the community which has not thoroughly and repeatedly discussed this question in all its bearings. We have had lately brought before us a novel phase of this eight hours question. There are those who argue that there might be a possibility of reconciling our differences if the majority of the miners could agree to accept what is commonly called the local option idea with regard to certain sections of the mining community. I know that the idea was suggested by Mr. Gladstone in Midlothian, and I know that that suggestion has been adopted by every prominent man in the country,

I suppose, as a means of getting over the difficulty. But I speak for myself, I speak for the men in the Lancashire Federation, and I believe I am speaking the sentiments of the National Miners' Federation, when I say that such a proposition in our estimation is simply ridiculous and beside the question altogether. You will have of course to consider that. It no doubt will come under discussion to-day, and will be treated by the various speakers in the way they think best. However, I think that in any question intended to apply to such a large body of men as the miners of this country, if the local option idea were to be entertained for one moment it would certainly imperil the success of the Bill in other parts of the country. That being so therefore, and the miners of the National Federation having considered that question on its merits, I think we would decline altogether to accept such a proposition. There is another great question on this programme, the Employers' Liability Bill, and it is satisfactory to know that we are agreed upon this point. It is much to be regretted that an attempt should ever have been made to force men out of the provisions of this Act. We know to our sorrow—I regret to say in many parts of the country—that men have been coerced and forced out of the provisions of this Act to their own injury and detriment. We have found, gentlemen, that in some parts of the country where this has been the case it has given an unnecessary and improper license to neglect, and to the consideration of cost rather than that of precious lives. I believe we are all agreed in this Conference—and I think we can see a bright streak of hope in the political horizon and in the position of public opinion of the country—that the day is not far distant when this Act will be made compulsory, so that neither workman nor employer will be able to contract out of its provisions. I never could understand why in an Act of Parliament, on which the lives and health of millions, or to be more moderate hundreds of thousands of people, have to depend, there should be a contracting clause allowing employers to contract away their responsibilities and liabilities under that Act. We know from experience and from statistics that wherever this Act has been tried it has been a means of saving life. We know, gentlemen, it has done much to lessen, and to enormously reduce, the number of mining explosions, owing to the fact that employers have great responsibilities put upon them from the operation of that important Act of Parliament. We also know that voluminous evidence has been taken upon this question by a Commission of the House of Commons, and I believe, from information I can glean, that the present Government will be able to assist us perhaps far better than we have been assisted in the past. We know, gentlemen, that there is now in the Home Office a Bill that was intended to be brought before the country. Because there did not appear to be the slightest possibility of its passing that Bill has been hidden away, and probably it will never see a resurrection. I think that the present Government, who like all other Governments are subject to public opinion, will be inclined to grant the wish of the working-

classes of this country, and make that Bill imperative and its operation general, prohibiting any contracting out of its provisions. There is another clause that we shall try to insist upon with regard to this important Act of Parliament, with regard to the question of common employment. Within the last few weeks we had a case in Lancashire which illustrates the necessity which exists for preventing this inhuman doctrine. We know that if an Act of Parliament was hanging over the employers' heads they would be careful as to what kind of men and boys they put in important positions in our collieries. I think it is self-evident—and the verdict of the jury, in my opinion, would justify me in saying it—that the boy who was the cause, in the general estimation, of that accident was certainly incompetent to perform the duties to which he was put by the manager of that colliery. The result is that sixteen precious lives have been sent into eternity. I think that if the doctrine of common employment is retained the Employers' Liability Bill will not accomplish so much as it was thought it would accomplish when it was passed by the House of Commons. However, I know that so far as the opinion of this Conference goes we shall use all the means at our disposal to prevent that doctrine being incorporated in any Employers' Liability Bill that may be discussed by any future Government. There is another point in our programme—the Mines Amendment Bill—which to us is very important. I suppose, gentlemen, that we shall never attain perfection in mining legislation. We believe, however, that our policy is onward and forward. We have accomplished much in the past. The laws regulating our mines to-day are far far superior to the laws which regulated our mines twenty-five years ago. We find from experience, from observation, and from the operation of the present Act of Parliament, that the existing Act is very incomplete and very insufficient, and that there is very great need of reform. Might I draw your attention to two or three points which I think are very important—reforms upon which I think we ought to insist in any forthcoming amendments proposed in the present Act of Parliament. First of all I think we shall agree as to the necessity of abolishing unskilled labour in our mines. It is a sad fact that during the last five years of prosperity from 80,000 to 100,000 additional men have gone into the mines of our country. Where do they come from? What class of men are they? Are they men who have been trained up in the full knowledge of the dangers of the mine—men having a thorough acquaintance of mining operations—or are they men who perhaps, taking the greater proportion, have never seen a mine in their lives until the time when they entered it a year or two ago? I have always held the opinion, and I hold it to-day, that, if we could trace to their origin many of those sad explosions that have happened in our past history, many explosions which have taken away hundreds of lives would be found to be due to the unexperienced and simple act of some man who was not aware of or acquainted with the dangers of mining. There is a proposal in the Amendment Bill which I think will meet your wishes, and that is that no one, after that Act comes

into operation, who has not been in a mine before he was 16 years of age shall be allowed to have a place in our collieries. That to some extent may meet the difficulty. There may be other ways of meeting it, but I feel sure that this Conference, with its broad experience and its knowledge of the dangerous encouragement given to accident by unskilled labour, will do all in its power to avert and provide against the common introduction of unskilled labour into the mines, which has brought about the frequent explosions of which we have so commonly complained. There is another clause in that Act to which I would first refer, upon a question that we have been advocating, to my knowledge, for the last thirty years. In this respect we have made some progress, but it is very unsatisfactory progress. We have appealed to Government after Government upon the question of the appointment of assistant inspectors of mines. A good many of us believe, gentlemen, that in many instances the gentlemen who are appointed to these positions do not give satisfaction to a large body of the men we represent. In some cases, I am sorry to say, their sympathies are altogether on the other side. It is a gratifying fact to us that, through the force of elementary education, we have scores of men in all our districts who have been able to pass examinations and to take first-class certificates—men who are now able to occupy the highest positions in mining. I think that we ought to press upon the Government the desirability of their giving preference, if possible and where possible, to men who have had a life experience in our collieries, and who are thoroughly conversant with both sides of the question, and not to scientific men, who have a thorough theoretical knowledge of the laws of mining, but very little practical knowledge in addition. There is a proposition in the amended Bill which has been agreed to in previous conferences of the Federation. Whether you will sanction it or not, I cannot say; but there is a proposal in this Bill to the effect that we should ask the Government to give us an assistant inspector for every 6,000 men employed. That, I admit, is a very drastic proposal; but it is no more drastic than the circumstances of the case require. What we want is inspection before the act, not inspection after the lives are taken away and after an accident has happened. I feel sure that with our present knowledge and experience of the past, and the success of mining legislation, no reasonable Government would refuse to listen to our plea when we ask them to appoint a very large addition to the present staff of inspectors, who are totally incompetent, so far as their numbers are concerned, to adequately inspect the mines of this country. I am not saying one word against these gentlemen. Many of them are very able men; many of them, I believe, do their work thoroughly, efficiently, and conscientiously. But we all know, gentlemen, from sad experience, that it is utterly impossible, with the number of inspectors that we have to-day, to do that work in anything like such a way as to give satisfaction to the wants of the mining population. There is another question, and that is with regard to ventilation, which is dealt with in our amended Bill. I do not know whether that proposal goes far enough. We

have had (some of us) an experience within the past month which I think, gentlemen, would justify us in taking very drastic steps to improve the ventilation of our collieries. I think we ought of necessity not only to have inspectors to inspect our mines thoroughly, but to insist upon having a proper and satisfactory area in all the air-ways in our mines. Where we have our low mines, I know it is difficult to have a very large air-way; but I consider no expense ought to be taken into account where life is at stake. We have had experience, in the Bamfurlong catastrophe, where many men who are in their graves to-day would now have been living had the air-way been in a more satisfactory condition. The evidence repeated and affirmed by many witnesses before the enquiry went to prove that the air-way was right, but that it was in such a condition that men were afraid to travel it. I think all air-ways ought to be put in such a position that there is sufficient area for a proper quantity of ventilation to keep the mines free and to prevent the possibility of an accident under almost any circumstances. The Act of Parliament is very obsolete on this point. It makes no provision at all as to the area—that is as to the height or width, or as to there being any incumbrances in the air-way. Very few of us were ever allowed to know anything about the air-ways, and many of the miners know scarcely anything about them. Seeing that we have arrived at a time when we are about to present an amended Bill before the House of Commons, something ought to be done by this Conference to insist, as far as we can, upon having a proper area in all the air-ways described by Act of Parliament, and thereby preventing any colliery manager, or any management whatever, from keeping out of the provisions of that clause. In many of our low seams we feel it more, and perhaps require the amendment more, than in many of the larger mines in the country. However, it is a question which will engage your attention during the discussions this week. I want to say a few words on the last question, which relates to the general wages of the miners. This, perhaps, is as important as any question that we can consider, especially at the present time. We have passed through a year of great difficulty. We are quite aware that many of the districts represented in this Conference have had to submit to large and serious reductions in wages. We deeply regret that this should have been the case. We should much have preferred to meet to-day and state that we had been able to maintain our wages against what is supposed to be a temporary depression in the trade of the country. I regret to say that in Scotland the miners have submitted to reductions—very great reductions. In Durham our friends, after a fierce fight of something like three months, had to submit to a 10 per cent reduction. Our friends in Northumberland, by an arrangement, had to submit to reductions also. Then we come to the southern portion of the country, and we find that our friends in South Wales have had to submit to a greater reduction—a reduction to the extent of 35 per cent—from their wages. I don't say it boastingly, but solemnly and earnestly—and I believe what I

am saying—that had it not been for the powerful organization that we have got together for the miners in the Midland Counties we should have been in the same category as those counties to which I have referred. It has been said by friends outside that our Federation has existed for one thing, and that is to get an Eight Hours Bill, that when that Eight Hours Bill is inscribed upon the Statute Book our organization will have finished its work. That is a foul slander upon our organization. Our organization, in its very inception, was formed to protect and to raise the miners' wages. We met in Manchester and found that what we could not do when isolated we might do as a combined army. We pulled ourselves together. God knows we have had a good deal to do in removing local differences out of the way, but we managed to do so, and I believe we put into operation such a power that we were able to force wages at that time. We set up then what was called a new policy. I know it is said that we are mere infants in organization, but at the same time the infant in this respect has shown that it is able to do valiant work. I am very pleased to know that though there has been whispered intentions in the opposite camp of an attempt upon our Federation, that attempt has not been made. I am glad to know and to acknowledge that there are noble-minded employers who have begun to believe in the same doctrine that we have set out to try to prove—that is, that there is a minimum below which wages should never go. We believe in the doctrine of political humanity. We believe in the doctrine that a man ought to live by his labour, and we believe that there is no power in the world which is able to kill that abominable and cursed competition which is the forerunner of reductions of wages except a powerful and united combination, and the stronger that combination is the more useful will it be and the better will it be able to protect the wages of the miners from those onslaughts which are made from time to time. We cannot see into the future. We have just entered upon a new year. We can read the past, but the future is a dark page to us. We are not prophets; we are not given to prophesying what will take place in the future; but we do say this. We know it as a fact—that had we not been organised, as we have been for the last twenty or thirty years in the Midland Counties of England, we should have been 20 per cent. lower in our wages to-day. We have proved that from actual experience. Standing here with our wages untouched we have a powerful argument in our favour when we ask our friends respectfully and with all good feeling—we should be sorry to have any other feeling towards them, as we are all friends in one common cause—to abolish their “isms” and their scales, and those things which keep us asunder one from another, and to join together for the common good, to elevate the miner, raise his wages, protect his life, and bring about those reforms which are sought by our association for the general improvement of the mining population of this country.