

Chairman's Address.

LATE PRESIDENT, etc.

The CHAIRMAN: Gentlemen, the third item on the Agenda is the President's Address. I have no need to ask your indulgence this morning whilst I attempt, somewhat feebly, to fill the shoes of the man who held this position for a great many years before I presided. Six years last January the Annual Conference met in this city and in this hotel. We are reminded of the many changes that have taken place since that day: particularly so we are reminded this morning that the President who for years had presided over our labours is no longer with us. We shall ever remember the memory of Mr. Pickard, and it seems to me that the greater distance between us only endears us to the memory of those who worked with him so long; and this morning we are also reminded of our old friend Cowey, who for years associated with us in these Conferences. Two of our comrades—Mr. Woods and Mr. Parrott—are unable to be with us this morning, through illness; and these are reminders of the frailty of our frame. But we treasure in our memory their character and their work, and no truer men ever lived to a cause than those men; and, with all our differences at times, we are capable, I hope, of estimating their greatness and their kindness.

ORIGIN OF THE MOVEMENT.

Since my appointment to this position I have been looking up somewhat the origin of the Conference movement, and I am

reminded that it is forty-one years ago this month since the first Conference of that character was held in Leeds; and, of the Delegates who attended, many of blessed memory, there does not appear to be one single name in active work to-day. The reports of that Conference were a revelation of the low conditions both of men and boys, the resolutions they adopted on education, inspection of mines, shorter hours, payment by weight, rights of checkweighers, and the abolition of the "butty" system, as then understood. These have been largely realised. Whatever may be said about the Trade Union movement, no one in the mining world to-day who will look back over that period but will discover that out of all this confusion and disorganisation we have not only created a great Union, but we have very largely remedied the grievances under which men and boys laboured in those days.

WOMEN WORKERS.

There are one or two remaining features yet that are not creditable even to the mining community. Among the many features of that Conference was discussed the women on the pit bank. What a satire after 41 years that we still have women employed on our pit banks. With regard to the question of the general employment of women neither this Conference nor the President will stop this morning to inquire. As to the fitness of an occupation such as that of trammung coal, screening coal, and cleaning coal, we, I think, this morning should offer as vigorous a protest as our fathers did 40 years ago, and therein it was flatly evident that it was an economic question pure and simple that largely women were employed, because that class of labour is cheaper. Surely there are callings more in keeping with the dignity of womanhood than being employed in that class.

BOY LABOUR.

Another feature that stands out conspicuously I want this morning to deal with, and somewhat tenderly, with what is likely to happen to-day—that feature is the difference that exists on boy labour. Through a long series of years that has lived too, and boy labour in mines further largely held the attention of many of the mining communities of to-day. At that Conference a resolution was moved—and I rather like the terms, not boy labour, but child labour—that no child enter the mines under 12 years of age. The memory of some of us carries us beyond that, when we were permitted to work before we reached even that tender age. The resolution moved there that they were not allowed to enter the mine for the purposes of employment under 12 years of age, and that there must be a qualification that they could read, write, and understand figures, it is astonishing, when they came to remember, that there were many people in the world then who believed those things were not necessary in workmen, and there are a few not very much wiser to-day. They also said that no boy should work more

than eight hours a day. That was supported at the Conference by the late Alex. Macdonald, and also by an old particular friend of mine, Mr. W. Brown; but an amendment was moved from Wallsend by a man whom they had a great regard for, Mr. Crawford, and seconded by Mr. Sheldon, of Blythe, that the boys should not work more than 10 hours a day, or from six to four. Is it not surprising that in these revolutionary days we have not moved very far in the boy labour question in this quarter yet. The movers of the amendment said that eight hours couldn't be carried out in their district. How that sentence lives. How many times have we been reminded of it—that eight hours would not work in those localities. What they said they wanted was 10 hours for boys and six hours for men. They lived to realise it. I hope that, at any rate, we have reached an epoch in our existence when we shall realise that the greatest care for the father of the future would be to take care of the lads of to-day.

WAGES QUESTION.

The year we have passed through has been a very eventful one. This Federation—the larger portion of it—was called upon to enter on a new Conciliation Scheme, called upon to reconstitute a scheme that regulated wages. We have many among us—it is not for me to complain about it this morning—many people who dispute the merits of a Conciliation Board, and who were unable to see how far-reaching its advantages may be in a time of stress and difficulty such as we are passing through. The greatest believers in conciliation never understood it would be a panacea for the ills of the trade. They were never intended to create trade, but, by the exercise of reason, to preserve it. Then, as new facts had to be faced, many of us believed that in the struggles to build up your great Federation it was worthy of the best in us to secure permanent peace in the trade; and, while negotiating with the coalowners, the one ideal that has initiated that movement and kept well to the front was, if possible, to raise the minimum wage. That has been the main foundation-stone of this Federation since its inception. We believe that it was better to spend all we had on raising the minimum, even if for the moment you lose some monetary gain—that it was better for a great Federation to look ahead and keep its feet well set before the storms come, so that through days of darkness and stress the members of this great organisation would realise in the deepest cloud the greatest strength of its Union. In the old days of the Unions, we faced the effects of trade with cupboards empty. You can never achieve a great settlement for Labour while all your people are starving. We deemed it wiser to fix up a settlement while the men's cupboards were full. The strength of a Union, to my mind, stands out conspicuously, if you concentrate the whole of the best that is in you to prevent the demoralisation and strife, and gain with it vastly more permanent advantages than by strike. Strikes we may have in days to come. The bigger we make our Unions, the more intelligently we understand it ourselves, we shall

have fewer strikes: at any rate, we shall be able to give to the world and ourselves a clear and intelligent reason why we strike at all.

JUDGE-MADE LAW.

During this year we have had revealed again to us the uncertainty of the law relating to our Trades Unions. Yorkshire and South Wales have to-day very marked cases of the uncertainty, the terrible uncertainty of this law. The law for thirty years we thought was right we have conspicuously discovered that it is not right: at any rate, it is not what we thought it was; and, at an enormous cost to this Federation, we have been trying to find out our position. One is tempted to ask why the rich Government in office makes no effort to find out what was right; but it precludes other people from taking means to find out what is right. Why do they hinder others from doing or discovering and placing on the Statute Book a law which shall clearly define the law? The moral, I believe, is that this class are not counted among their friends.

COMPENSATION.

During the week we shall discuss the Law of Compensation. The Departmental Committee has issued its report, but, to my mind, it does not cover the grounds of our complaints against that Act, and it will leave, at any rate for some time, organised labour to battle for itself to adjust this question. We shall fight, I hope, for more equitable terms in its treatment of the soldiers of industry and toil, so that they may be fairly and properly treated.

OLD AGE PENSIONS.

We shall discuss Old Age Pensions. What great revelation we have of the defections in human nature, systems torn, twisted, and stunted by conditions under which a man labours, and those very conditions are speedily preparing him for an old age pension, but there is none in view. Years before I came into the world it was stated of men that grey hairs were the glory of his life, the grey hoary-headed man; but in these modern days among pitmen they were a passport to the workhouse, and it does seem to me that if two things were necessary to go together the Workmen's Compensation Act should be accompanied by an old age pension. Many of us are reminded that in 1898, during the boom in trade, the full effect of the Workmen's Compensation Act was not realised. Labour was scarce, but as the trade resumed its normal condition—when we got thrown back on trade—then strong, healthy men discovered, because their legs were crooked, because their vision was impaired, because they felt the effects of age stealing in the centre of their manhood, they were reminded there is no place here for you. Forty years ago private employers might have had some regard for old and aged servants, but the companies of to-day had no regard to long services, except that which makes profits and paid dividends.

EIGHT HOURS.

We shall have on the agenda our old friend the eight hours question. I wonder oftentimes how long with the eight hours it will be our business to peg away until we realise it. I want to suggest to you from this chair whether the time has not come when the main features of that French Bill we were informed of should not form part of the Bill from this Federation. What are the great arguments against the adoption of this Bill? Our old pits and customs and obsolete machinery would render it impossible to put in force any law. I realise the longer hours worked in many districts would be the serious factor to face of having eight hours adopted, but it does seem to me, the while holding to my idea of our eight hours, if we could get a Bill drafted which will within a given number of years so reduce the period year by year by fractions, it will be better then to wait 10 years for the realisation of our hopes, with some certain hope of securing it, than going on pegging away in the way we are. I am hopeful that this grand Federation will take a wrinkle even from the French miners, because, after all, if we mean what we say we mean, then the means—the best means—adopted ought, at any rate, must receive, the assent of such a Conference as this.

REPRESENTATION IN THE HOUSE.

During recent years we have been asking for a greater share of political representation of our people in the House of Commons. We have a scheme, as you know, drafted, assented to, and approved by the various districts represented in this Conference. The underlying idea when that scheme was formed was rather than spend large sums of money in lobbying men on Mining Bills—men who were absolutely ignorant of them—they would rather spend it on returning men direct to the House who knew something about them. I want to say all in this Conference are anxious at any rate that our Labour Scheme shall not be any groundwork of any friction to the great number of our Unions we represent here: the application of it all was to see to it it did nothing to impair the strength and fundamental principles we have in this Conference. When this scheme was floated, it was not intended to be hostile to any progressive, or to any Labour Party in the country: it was mooted to carry out the Miners' Programme, and I hope we shall live long enough, all of us, to see the Miners' Programme carried out, it always being understood that it would give its support unflinchingly and unswervingly to any effort to remove the burdens of the poor, and to wage war against war, against monopoly, against plunder; and to broaden the liberties of the people, and to place on the Statute Book the Bills we have been clamouring for for the safety of our men. It is largely the great groundwork and fundamental principle that we are after, and I hope we are after it to-day, and that we should take such a course in this Conference to preserve

that ideal every man here realises. If we hope to succeed at the polls, we must captivate the voters: you cannot very well win it otherwise. Our very existence will force us always to carry us along the lines where the progressive party leads, always seeking to uplift humanity, call them what name you like. The outlook for the moment is not of the rosiest: here and there wings of this great Federation have their troubles to face. We are hoping by the application of the intelligence and force of this great Federation operating in the districts of every wing that is affected, when we shall be able to throw around them the greater sheltering wing to the greater good of every district which belongs to it. One law was clearly understood: that, if times of adversity teaches us anything, it should teach us to tighten the bond of union between the greater districts and lesser districts; and, with that hope before us, and encouraged thereby, when we meet some of the stalwarts from Northumberland this afternoon, we are hopeful to find a solution at all events in the interest of a great trade, a great people, we may find a way to one Union and one Federation of the movement.

FISCAL POLICY.

There have not been many questions during recent years that have stirred through the depths of our being than the attempt to impose upon us the old days of dear food. To-day the centre of a great agricultural area under the shadow of another duke, this programme of dear food for the people—being a boon for the people—were illustrated by the man, of all others, who in other days professed a profound contempt for dukes and earls. In these modern days one shudders to think a great question wherein hangs the limb and soul of this empire should receive its bolstering touch from dukes and earls who never gave very great evidence of any desire of the permanent weal of the working classes. One thing, at any rate, we will try to keep in view—that this great Federation of miners will not for a moment be captivated by any method of preferential tariffs to make the food of the people dear. To my mind one of the crowning features of this country, in spite of its weakness, is that the fruits of all lands, and the best of the earth, finds its way in, because there is no barrier. Our ports are open for all the productions of the world. On these lines I hope we shall be found at our posts of duty when the election comes. Every man, big or little, great or small, who worked to make this Federation what it is, will in no uncertain sound fight to secure a fair representation of its interests on the floor of that House, and having accomplished this much we shall be able, at any rate, to explain to that great assembly what is the meaning of a Mines Bill, and what is the meaning of all those measures intended for the protection of the life and health of our workmen, and we will be prompted, buoyed up, and encouraged in this great ideal that no nobler work can a man be engaged in than in reducing the destruction of human life. Whatever glory there is for a general

in the Far East to my mind the greatest ideal is that attained by a community of people, or by an individual, who seeks not to destroy life, but to preserve, perpetuate, and prolong that life, and seeks to reduce the conditions that life will not be a life of drudgery, but a foretaste of the greater beauties of the life that lies before him.