

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 5th.

Mr. E. EDWARDS (President) in the Chair.

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS.

STATE OF THE COAL TRADE.

Gentlemen, it is quite time that we commenced our business. It is rather unusual that the President's address should fall in when the conference has half finished its labours, but that there are reasons for it all over which I have no special control. However, I am pleased to think that circumstances have favoured me and my meeting to-day, although two days late. These annual gatherings from many points of view are always interesting; they reveal to us the amount of work that we do, and the very slow speed that we travel at in a world like this. The year that has gone has not been much more marked than the years that preceded it. In the coal trade at any rate it has not been so interesting, it has not been so profitable as those of us here like to see. I have no desire to traverse the line of argument that would be taken up by the Chairman of the three separate Conciliation Boards, but I think we sufficiently realise the trend of things and the state of the trade generally, when we come to look at our side of the question, that it has not been as healthful, or say as profitable, as we would have liked to see it. The outlook for the moment is not so depressing as it was at this time last year, that might be in these days of depression. They must be thankful for small mercies. Could anyone conceive after the blizzard yesterday how welcome the genial rays of the sun are, and if there is a ray of light and hope at all, the outlook in the trade in which those of you represent I don't know but what they must not be rejoicing in the fact that matters looked a little brighter than this day twelve months. Of course for certain reasons I am afraid the representatives of the other side will not be in such a great hurry to make that admission. At the moment it is not very convenient to admit that trade was at all better, I would not like to suggest that they are not quite as anxious that trade might improve as we are, but not to admit that the improvement is better just now. It is not one of the most convenient things for them and their side, at any rate it is from our point of view and we are hopeful that after this Conference the three Chairmen of the three Conciliation Boards will realise that

we realise that trade is sufficiently healthful to prevent at any rate any demination of the wages of the men, and after all while we deal with these mundate things in the world, wages have some sort of connection with the life and happiness of a large class of people. They had not reached that ideal stage when men could live without them, from our point of view whilst circumstances are what they are the little extra wages means very largely extra comforts, extra happiness in the homes of thousands of men in this country, however, we are moving if slowly, we are moving and it is something to be said that we are moving at all. It is characteristic somewhat to slide up and down and it requires a considerable amount of energy and courage and determination on the part of a great race of men to be sure in sliding down they do not back to worse conditions than they had before. I think this morning that those of you who are fairly well informed of the mining history of the last forty years realise after all things are better with us to-day than they were forty years ago. I do not want to make too much of that, things are better with a great many people in the world than forty years ago ; but whether the working class themselves have received a benefit comparatively better or equal to the benefits the great middle and commercial classes have received during the last forty years, that is one of the things open to question. For the moment, at any rate, we realise this morning that things are better than 40 years ago, although they are not to-day in that ideal condition that most in this room would like them to be. I would take it, if we have any influence and if we have any controlling forces, we shall endeavour to get it whether to-day or to-morrow. We are bound to realise there were more strikes in those days, and the grievances under which the men laboured were greater in those days, hours of work longer, wages paid for work much less, and the difficulty was that men often said when they got their wages they would not get it all, and also the men never got their money after they had got it. Well, anyone who worked in the pits prior to the Mines Act of 1872 he would know fairly what was meant by words employed in this sentence—he did earn wages per score, but cannot get his money. Were, happily, we have remedied very largely that state of things there had not been so great a desire among employers and other people to be honest and fair and straightforward with them, but there were to-day a very large number of employers and other men as honest in their intentions as most of us who sit in this room. Of course, circumstances, combination of circumstances, gives a man his opportunity, and those days of confiscation and deductions from their wages was a character which reflected no moral credit on any employer who employed them, whatever his methods, to take away from a man half his wages because the law admitted it, rather suggested the law ought to be altered at any cost to see the men's wages were not interfered with. Those who live in these modern forgot the enormous sacrifices that had been made. Some of them remembered the sacrifices that had been made to carry out the

work that had been performed up to now on behalf of the working class.

TRADES UNIONS AND BETTER CONDITIONS.

With regard to Trades Unions I have discovered in my time a lot of people were wonderfully impressed towards them and say many kind things about them, and I hope in carrying out what they considered their rights and interests, however difficult, we shall not lack in energy, courage, and fairness in prosecuting what we believe right and proper. Then they ought to turn their attention to a state of better and more satisfactory conditions under which they are employed, more healthy surroundings, a better state of the atmosphere than men work in. There would be less slaughter, when one comes to remember to-day how many of the great explosions that have taken place would bear strict, close inquiry. Look at it; while in those modern days, since our last annual meeting in Bristol, explosions have occurred in some parts of this Federation, inquiries have been held, and the information that has been elicited has not in any way satisfied the great bulk of this Conference that everything is done to prevent explosions in coal mines. To my mind there is no loftier conception of patriotism and duty than that of a man seeking to prevent the destruction of human life and to try to add to that existence given to mortal man here.

NORTHUMBERLAND AND DURHAM.

During the year we have made great efforts to bring within the fold the Northumberland miners. There is not a man in this Conference but that regrets they are not found to-day seated round table with us. We were very hopeful at Bristol. It was natural characteristic of our youth to be hopeful. Happily, they cannot blame us for it. Some of us are hopeful yet, though not realised, but when they remember the character of the Union men in the North, when they remember they understood thoroughly Trades Unionism, when they remember the size and strength of their Unions, how the men had gripped it and held to it amid good and bad times, we cannot but fail to see it was a great loss to the Union forces that they should be outside a great organisation like this, and we feel short of sacrificing any great principle. So far as we are concerned, no effort should be spared to get Northumberland inside this organisation.

A DELEGATE : And Durham.

The CHAIRMAN : Well, the application had come from Northumberland, Durham have not asked us. Many of us thought it would be much easier for Durham to ask us after Northumberland had joined us. Let me say none of us look upon this Federation as

a complete Federation until we have in some way or other gripped hold of these two districts. We must all work and go on with it. We have discovered even in this hour of the day the great stumbling block to Federation was, and is yet, the Eight Hours. All the trades in this Kingdom have expressed their adherence to the principle of eight hours save and except the miners of Durham and Northumberland, and I am bound to admit there appeared to be a desire on the part of Mr. Burt and Mr. Fenwick to bridge over any difference that was a condition of union with them. We can and on so many things we do agree, but on this question of eight hours as yet we have not found means of agreement. I don't want to talk about the difficulties laying round this eight hours except to state our position. While we are prepared to sacrifice a great deal to bring about a Union between us and them, it is too big a price to ask us to pay to yield in the question of eight hours where boys and young people are employed. They have secured for themselves much shorter hours for adults but the young life in mines in Durham and Northumberland are employed beyond those hours, and I am afraid that unless we can convince these people, or they are convinced, that after all it is vastly of more importance to have one Federation in one great industry than a mere stand-off on the question of eight hours about boys or men. Surely the Northern men will realize that there is nothing morally wrong about the suggestion that it was long enough for a lad to work in the pit eight hours a day. I don't think the economic question should enter into it for a moment. They are like anybody else, these men are wedded to these conditions, and with regard to this question they are agreed we are entirely blocked by the North, and no reasonable efforts shall be spared to-day or to-morrow to bring about that desirable object, to bring these people to the fold. I hope I shall be living to bring about this, seated round this table or under some other gentleman in one Federation representing all the miners throughout Great Britain.

BILLS BEFORE PARLIAMENT.

During the year while legislation moves very slowly, I am sure it does not move slower than yesterday and the day before, and although it moves slowly, in our business there was just one ray of light, though the Session has been barren, it has produced one small Bill. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain has been hammering away at Bills of all sorts of shapes and sizes for the last sixteen years, yea, for the last thirty or forty years. This Federation since its first inception has been hammering away at certain Bills, they had managed to get the Checkweigher's Bill at last. I am not sure whether we shall be doing wrong if we gave largely the credit of it to our Scottish friends. I do not intend to traverse the ground as to why we had got the Bill at all, but we were all agreed if certain conditions of things were possible it was time we had what now is our Checkweighman's Bill. It is the only small crumb of comfort

politically that we have had this last year, yea, or for many years. Our thanks are due very largely to Mr. Compton Rickett, for his tact in dealing with this question. A number of us in this room remember the many Conferences, and the Conferences with the employers. I can assure you as I view these things very much credit is due to Mr. Rickett for his efforts in this matter, and we discovered in Committee another very important feature, the Committee on this Bill gave the Labour member on that Committee an opportunity at any rate, assisting us in defending our side of the question, and without bringing in any special name at all, I am sure Mr. Ashton and myself realised the Labour men on that Committee did us very great service when the Bill had to be thrashed out there, and therefore ultimately we have got that Bill placed on the Statute Book, which gives greater protection to the checkweighman, and gives greater rights in appointing an assistant checkweighman, and gives greater security to his wages. I hope this little Bill for 1905 is a prelude to the greater Bills lying before us at this Conference.

GOVERNMENT—SOUTH AFRICA AND CHINESE LABOUR.

Our hopes at present are not of a very rosy character, we have got so little. We have managed in the past in this country now and again without a government, and I am not sure whether it would not have been a good thing for us to have managed without a government during the last five years more than once; but whatever the merits or demerits this government may have, they will have their friends like all people who go astray. It is one characteristic if a young fellow goes away he is the best lad living, and people look after them. I can understand men with enormous interests having a special liking for a government such as we have, but from our side, from the workers side, we have not a great deal to thank them for. Their first great effort at any rate does not mark them out as special favourites of the democracy. They smashed two small Republics, not one of the most dignified things for a great democratic country to smash two struggling countries. Looking back now on the South African War I don't think anybody is very much mistaken as to what was the main reason why we smashed these people. If it had been a struggling peasantry and a struggling peasantry only, there would have been no smashing of the republics, but a few people had discovered there was enormous wealth there. It was because of this wealth of these people we went to war and smashed these republics, and what has followed? You have got the Chinese. What a satire on our boasted civilisation and freedom! That all the regulations were made to regulate human flesh and blood you brought it there for what purpose? To get money out of it. Brought it there specially that you might feed and grow fat on it. They were brought into South Africa, and unable to retain their rights of liberty, you had abolished slavery, and now they introduce

Chinese for greed and not for the glory of an illustrious nation, but for the greed of a certain class of the community who were claiming more than their share in the rights and privileges and heritages in this great empire. Well, gentlemen, there is no room for white labour. Let me call your attention for a moment, whatever might have been the weakness and faults of old Kruger, if Kruger and his party had sanctioned Chinese labour on the lines that the present government have sanctioned Chinese labour, your public halls and public press would have rung out with one complete protest, and we should have rushed to the rescue to take the government and power from Kruger. But we, a great, boasted, civilised, humanising race, could do it with impunity. I hope the day of reckoning will come, and it will come quickly, and I hope the great mass of men in this country will not be twisted on every little minor issue, but will smash this government as no government has been smashed, until at any rate we have wiped out the disgrace of this most memorable thing in South Africa. Then you remember when the Colonial Secretary paid his visit he came back home, and drifted out of office. Every man in this room, I believe, feels a sort of pride for a man who is so capable and brilliant as Mr. Chamberlan, but we are sorry, exceedingly sorry, for many of the acts of his later life, and it is clear his resignation was not long in coming when he had seen South Africa and seen his work.

COAL TAX.

Then came the Coal Tax. It has come home to some of you. It has come home to South Wales. You cannot separate it from the wages of the men, the prices, and wages for work. You cannot if you try; it must come home to you. The tax was put on because of this war, and although some supporters of the Government were against the tax, human nature is such that the Tories would not fight against the Government and turn them out. It would have been an awful thing to turn them out. With regard to the tax there is not a man in the country can sit down and honestly face this question who will not realise that the wages of the workman are jeopardised in all great exporting districts where the 1/- a ton is charged. We ventured to say, many of us, that this 1/- a ton would eventually fall on the workers, and here you have a foretaste of what Protection will do for the community. The Government in their blindness and stupidity predicted this policy—that the foreigners will pay the 1/- tax. The foreigners, however, will get what they required at the lowest. If we artificially increase the cost somebody else will step in. Everybody understands the logic—if you make coal 1/- a ton dearer exported, then your competitors simply take your trade or you keep your trade at the expense of that 1/-; it is perfectly clear and logical. The owners give way and say, we can afford to sell it for less, we will get in yet. Then they come to you and tell you at the Conciliation Board meetings the prices are down so much. I think prices would look healthy in the coal trade if that

1/- Coal Tax was out of the way. I see that the time has gone very much quicker than my speech, and I must realise that I am not as well as I might be, and the time is going.

OLD AGE PENSIONS.

However we have on the Agenda the question of Old Age Pensions, you have anxiously looked forward to the realisation of Old Age Pensions. Somebody has done me the kindness to send me a letter this morning, and in that letter he tells me that our best course would be to go in and oppose all pensions, either in the civil Service, Army and Navy, oppose all of them until we got pensions ourselves. Well I am not at all sure whether that is the best course, we should be spending a lot of energy in opposing the men having pensions. I am not opposed to any man who has served his day and generation faithfully having a pension for services rendered. Of course, you know Society has a way of its own of giving pensions. If a man has a big salary it stands to sense he cannot live without a pension, and if he has a small salary he can do without a pension; they always regulate a scale of that sort. If a man in your Municipal and County Councils, even though not in a position scarcely worth £10, it was considered desirable to pay him a pension for life whatever value the appointment was, and if the working men had not been the slowest and dullest for the past two thousands years, the class of the smaller number would never have been allowed to monopolise the principal of Old Age Pension to the exclusion of the great army of workers. This question of workmen's pensions is slowly moving, and people are beginning to realise there is no disgrace in taking a pension. Up to now, one of the chief weapons used against it has been to show how lowering it was for a workman to take a pension, but they had discovered that their friends were having big ones and that the workman who did not earn much got nothing, but the man with the big "screw" got everything. It is our business to see to it; at any rate, having once started this question, we cannot give it any rest until we realise that the workhouse is not necessarily a man's end and that a pension is provided for him somewhere. As it now stands, the workhouse is the worker's last home and he then forfeits the freedom of citizenship. It is a pauper's end, he shouts for the expansion of Empire for somebody else and he himself glides quietly to the workhouse in the evening of his life.

UNEMPLOYED.

Then there is another question coming rapidly to the front—and very properly so—the question of the unemployed. I think here, if ever Labour Members exhibited to the workers in this country the great possibilities underlying a strong Labour

Group in Parliament you have it in this case. It was only the persistency of the Labour Members that forced the hands of the Government. The Act was inadequate to meet such a great problem, but it was the first step and was none the less important. Personally, I have yet to understand why a great Government merely provided labour yards where men broke stones, or provided timber made to chop in bundles, or finding the men something to do and finding them some pay. To my mind these courses are not at all in keeping with a great people and with the dignity of a great Government. First of all, why cannot the Government tackle the question of the main waterways from one end of the country to the other? Here on a large scale labour could be employed and employed on great national projects. The excellence of the waters and the commerce of the nation would be permanently benefitted, because it would provide cheaper methods of transits, and would be much better than the methods that obtain to-day, and in doing it would undertake great national works and employ men on a larger scale. The scheme possessed great capabilities, and in the end it would be a valuable asset in the wealth it would bring to the nation. They all knew what the Manchester Ship Canal had done. Our position against the Continent was not so much a question of Protection, but we do rather desire to get some relief from the tyrant land system which would enable us to make the best of our opportunities, but your vested interests block the way, and for the same reasons we cannot get the people back to the land. To my mind no political programme is worthy of the full and serious consideration of the masses of this country if it leaves out the permanent settlement of the land question. That lies at the root largely of much of the mischief and some of the suffering we suffer from to-day, and with that comes the heavy toll levied on industry. Royalty rents and wayleaves are much higher than any other country in Europe, and we pay enormously higher than the Colonies or the United States. What we desire is, we want some liberty and freedom from what appears to blocking us look which way you will.

TRADES DISPUTE BILL.

With regard to the Trades Dispute Bill, although you dealt with it so fully and so well at the opening day, I would like to say that as I look on the majority of the present House as incapable, through ignorance of Trades Unionism and through stupidity and self-interest, of dealing justly with such a measure. You have only to take the action of these people, and then you have the evidence in committee. We shall perhaps, find a way out of it when the workmen have realised the greatness of their own powers. From Lancashire they had strong opposition and obstruction from a man representing a great working class constituency, in fact, not far from here.

WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION BILL.

The Government dropped their amended Compensation Bill. I am not sorry they dropped it, the Government Bill was a retrograde Bill, and it is to my mind better to leave it for a new House to deal with.

POLITICAL AND LABOUR REPRESENTATION QUESTION.

The great forces of labour bore no special liking for this present House of Commons, it is flooded by rich men. Then we are not to have politics in Labour, I think everything in that House is political more or less, that is why they get there and are there. After thirty years we have secured twelve or fourteen Labour Members in the House. We have done that much and now with our improved opportunities and improved education, it is only fair to say that the great mass of electors have opportunities of better education than the men who had to deal with these questions thirty years ago. We have as you know a scheme, we are rather fond of our scheme, we are hopeful that when the election is over we shall have a much added strength. I can look round amongst our friends here and we are very proud of them, what we want to do is to send men to the House of Commons who are capable of putting the case of the workers or by giving information, to have their case put fairly and squarely on the floor of that House. During municipal life largely the working men have had a character for service, unselfish service, and his character will bear examination with anybody. We are anxious to impress the point that ours will be a Labour Party. Everybody who has read that scheme and subscribed to it is in the full belief that therein we shall get a pure, select strong Labour Party, and the object of paying them a salary to live upon is doing their best to free the men you send from the influence of the rich men. I am aware certain men in these days are all under the domination and influence of the men wealthier than themselves. What we are seeking to do, at any rate, by this scheme is that these men that are representing a great body of men and absolutely free from party ideas shall vote and act square on all questions that affect the interests of the masses of the workers of this country. We have made this discovery, and we must open our eyes to it, that the class privileges will be strongly entrenched, and what we desire is to have forty or fifty of our own members strongly entrenched and agreed over all to vote for their particular party. I put it that that party can only, and only, be a Labour Party. It cannot be anything else. It must be the forces of labour that they are there to vote for, otherwise the whole thing will be a mis-nomer. In doing it they will be ready to accept and welcome any one who says he is desirous to help us on the floor of the House. We will give those their due, there are men in the House of Commons. There is no man in this conference who could get up and say we must not encourage Sir Charles Dilke. He can give us a great deal

more than we can give him, but in doing it all we ought to point out to Sir Charles and others, we must make it clear and definite and emphatic at no price can our freedom and our right to represent the 750,000 miners employed underground, and other workmen and their families, in that House be given away, and if we don't realise for the moment all we are embodying for the higher amelioration of the classes to which we belong, we will try by our efforts, by our sincerity, by our truthfulness, to leave the miners better than we found them, and to make the mining community healthier and correspondingly better, and make the world better than when we came into it.