

Miners' Federation of Great Britain.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

HELD AT THE

Hotel Metropole, Swansea,

Tuesday, October 2nd, 1906, and following days.

Mr. E. EDWARDS, M.P. (President) in the chair.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

COMMENCEMENT OF FEDERATION.

Gentlemen,—You have the agendas before you, and you discover that the next item is the President's Address. Since I arrived in Swansea I remember that on the borders of this little Welsh Nation we met in Newport and formed what is now the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. Leading up to it we had had many and various unions and amalgamation of unions, and whatever may be thought about our greater Federation the small unions served a very useful purpose in their day, and sowed the seed for this bigger organisation which is represented in this Conference.

LATE OFFICIALS.

Associated with that movement were some of the best spirits that ever lived, and I am sanguine enough to believe, in all this hurry of these modern days, we shall have a warm corner in our hearts always for the men who worked when friends were few and the cause they worked for so unpopular. Many of us called to mind the efforts of Mr. A. Macdonald in the early struggles, and I am proud to think as a Staffordshire man, that Staffordshire, small and unimportant, was the county that made it possible for Mr. Macdonald to find a seat in the House of Commons. Now my immediate predecessor in this chair did us yeoman service, and as distance grows between the time when he presided over our deliberations we seem to realise the many brilliant fighting qualities that our friend, Mr. Pickard had, and I am satisfied, whatever lies beyond us, we shall always appreciate the great services rendered by him and others, in founding that great Federation to which we are proud to belong.

TRADE UNIONS AND PUBLIC OPINION.

In these days there is considerable alarm about Trade Unions, a considerable amount of unrest that they are in a hurry to claim their heritage, and in doing so might spoil somewhat the beauty of this world. Personally, I have no fear for the working man of this Country, I have no fear either to-day or to-morrow that they will get very far wrong. The classes in society and the rich people who profess to make nations often get wrong, but to the credit of the working men in all their great movements they had not gone very far wrong. It is largely a question of interpretation of what was meant by wrong, and if in what we are seeking to do there be any wrong, then, before this Conference is over he shall plead guilty. If striving for shorter hours and more leisure for the working men of this Country; if fighting for higher wages and greater comforts; if fighting and seeking for greater safeguards to life and limb of the men; if fighting for better surroundings in the homes of the people, looking for greater care for the children who are helpless and cannot help themselves, and true respect to the aged workers; if all this be wrong, then the British workmen may be guilty of it.

GENERAL ELECTION AND RESULTS: LABOUR REPRESENTATION.

Since we met in Blackpool, as you know, we have gone through the turmoils of a General Election. As you know, the Miners' Federation, and the miners generally, have been among that band of workers who, whatever may be said outside this room, have taken a lead in Labour Representation. I call to mind my old friend "Mabon," sitting on my left here, who has become an historical figure. For twenty-one years, Normanton and the Rhondda sent Labour Representatives to the House. We had, as you know, when we met last year, only three—our good friend Mr. Parrott, whose face and presence we miss this morning; Mr. Richards, and Mr. Abrahams to represent the great interests of this Federation in the House of Commons. At the General Election, from the abundant provision we had made as a Federation, because, after all, with our quiet scorn for the wealthy, we found wealth very useful. We have no scorn for wealth, even if we have no sympathy with the wealthy; but we have realised that wealth is exceedingly necessary, and the Miners' Federation made that discovery at the General Election. We had had some experience, and it came in very useful. We put forward sixteen candidates. We did not carry them all. It is not the first experience of a Trade Union to fail to carry all their men. We returned three unopposed. That speaks somewhat well for the strength and prestige of our friends representing these Divisions. Eight of the others went through a contested election, giving us a majority of over 20,000 votes. Five failed to be elected, and I think the sincere wish of this Conference will be, at any rate, that it may not be long before our friends retrieve their position, and take their places

with us in the House of Commons. So, on the whole, I think we have cause for thankfulness this morning on the result of that first great trial we have had at the Polls. We will do better by-and-by. We must keep up our courage and strength, and take good care that our judgment and wisdom is commensurate with that strength, so that we may secure for ourselves a strong position amongst the workers of the world.

WAGE QUESTION.

The wage question, since we met, has been brought before you in Conferences in various forms. It moves slowly, but I think we shall agree that our present method of dealing through Conciliation Boards is the right one; it moves more surely and solidly than it did in the old days of fighting and war and strife, and whatever we may think about that, the best interests of the workers are served if we can do it by great Unions settling wage questions before a fight, rather than to have to settle when you have exhausted all your resources. It is a matter for congratulation there has been no great strike during the year, because there have been no wasted resources. Of course, we have little strikes and shall have while human nature is human nature. I remember I am in South Wales: they like a little tiff now and again, but they realised, everybody realised, that great, strong and formidable Unions will always be bound to make better terms, much better terms—the stronger their Union is the stronger their financial resources will be, and much better terms will be made than if the Union were weak. If we had greater Unions we should have less strikes everywhere—strikes at best are a menace to the truest and best interests of the workers. Of course, some of our friends may possibly remind me they support the principle of compulsory arbitration, but we are not ready for it yet, we prefer rather that a great Union should exercise its strength in numbers and its great strength of intelligence than be forced by any Government to a solution of the disputes. What we need as a solution on these matters is a closer bond of union as the best preventative of strikes. It is somewhat gratifying that during the last few weeks Continental opinion is veering round to the opinions we have taken up in this matter. The leaders of industrial thought, in the centre of the great coal industries, have expressed themselves against using this great power of strikes, unless, and I agree myself, unless we can find no other solution possible and no other way out of it. Rather than sacrifice our dignity and honour, yea, even the Miners' Federation would fight. The outlook before us is much brighter and more hopeful than it was eighteen months ago.

COAL TAX.

The abolition of the Coal Tax should be helpful in getting better wages, unless the employers barter it away in their struggle to secure fresh markets. It may be that this great Federation, with our allies in the North co-working with us—they

are sincere with us in this matter—it may be this great Union will be called upon to impress their importance even on the Colliery owners of this country, and say their struggles for markets must not be taken up too keenly at the risk of ignoring the wages and comfort and happiness of the workmen.

INTERNATIONAL QUESTIONS.

Our efforts during the year internationally have continued to improve. We discovered at our recent Committee that all through the Continent there was a movement for higher wage. In Germany, Belgium and France, there is better trade, and there has been a considerable increase in the selling prices; on the Continent that is securing to many thousands of them advances in wages. We are hopeful, but it is quite clear that there cannot be an intelligent understanding nor friendly reciprocity between us and our continental friends, unless we show some desire to keep up wages there rather than seek to destroy their trade by producing in their markets cheaper coal. We rather assured our Continental friends that we were desirous that the abolition of the 1/- tax should not oust them out of any market, but that it should find its way into the pockets of the workmen themselves. This international movement has promoted, and is promoting more cordial relations between the workers there and ourselves. We are persuaded that large standing armies, so costly, will not be necessary when the masses of workers concerned, more clearly understand this question, and are brought more closely together. To my mind this phase of the international movement, apart from either wages or hours, is most hopeful, and one of the most dignified aspects of this great international movement. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain might take the credit of being the pioneers of this movement. For seventeen years we have been seeking a better understanding; for seventeen years we have been seeking a closer relationship with them, and we have now succeeded, with the kindly help of our friends in linking up every nation in Europe, and now joined up America; the future so far as I see it is full of hope.

DURHAM AND NORTHUMBERLAND.

The Northern Miners are in full sympathy with this movement. The next best step would be to get them inside this Federation, and so far as I am concerned, as your President, I will take care no words of mine will widen that gulf. It is quite evident there is silently at work, throughout these two counties, a movement to find their way to their natural nest, and with the rest of Great Britain, make common cause on all common questions for the common good of the men they represent.

DISASTERS IN MINES AND ROYAL COMMISSION.

The Executive has had to deplore, since last meeting, several serious colliery disasters. South Wales has been exceedingly

unfortunate during the last two or three years in the loss of lives and number of accidents that have occurred. Your Executive instructed the Secretary on two occasions to call the attention of the Government, or the Home Office on behalf of the Government, to what we regarded as very serious questions, and nothing could be more serious than destruction to human life. It may be sad on a battle field, but to my mind it is much sadder that a man, in his ordinary pursuits of his avocation, is slaughtered, he and his comrades, particularly so when the civilised world is satisfied that many of these accidents ought never to happen at all. That question had been before the late Government and the present Government. The late Government, I believe, intended, and I am not here to seek to disparage the virtues even of the late Government if they had any, but one thing is clear I think it was their intention—there were many good intentions in this world—to appoint a Royal Commission. The present Government when they came into power through the Home Office appointed a Special Royal Commission to inquire into these accidents in mines, and for the first time in the history of this great labour movement the Home Secretary invited and appointed the Presidents of the three great Mining Unions of Great Britain, Wales, and Scotland as members of that Commission. They were already at work, and it will ill become me to enter or discuss the work that lies before us this morning, but merely to say they could feel confident that all questions affecting materially the working side of this question would be carefully watched by their three representatives on that Commission.

EIGHT HOURS.

During this year we have for the first time got our Eight Hours Bill through the House of Commons without a division. Many of us there would have liked to have seen a vote taken on it, but it is very difficult to take a vote when the people who are opposed to it run away. Since the General Election we have carried this vote through the Second Reading without a Division. Our friends from the North, as usual in the House, opposed us. There is a little hopefulness even in this situation with many of the Northern Miners. Northumberland men have taken a ballot and that ballot may be said to fairly express the intense earnest wish of the men, surrounded by their opposition, a majority of the Miners in Northumberland have voted in favour of Eight Hours. The Government, as you are aware, have appointed a Departmental Committee to take evidence. I do not want to say much about this Committee, as President of your Society except this, this Great Federation cannot afford to give its position away after fighting so long for this Eight Hours. We cannot afford to give it away even to the Commission appointed by a Government who is favourable to the Bill. We must go forward with this Bill and at the earliest possible moment place it on the Statute Book of this Country. It is so easy in a Commission to find economic reasons

against it, it has always been easy for Commissions to find economic reason against paying more wages and working shorter hours, but we have got beyond the economic stage surely after these years of agitation. Everyone knew what we are seeking and I quite expect this Conference to endorse that position on the Eight Hours, and that neither a sympathetic Liberal or Tory Government, or any Government, will divert our attention from that plain situation and this Eight Hours Bill we mean to obtain by hook or by crook.

WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION.

A question that is surrounded with difficulty, as every miners' official knows, is the working of the Workmen's Compensation Act. The Government brought in an amended Bill and in that Bill the Government amended considerable defects in the former Act, but to many of us who were there it did seem not to go far enough, or not sufficiently explicit for our purposes and what we desire. That measure was submitted to a Committee on Law, and on that Committee there were some fifteen or sixteen representatives of Labour. Of course, from my point of view, I cannot make any distinction, because on that Bill there were no two opinions, with the labour representatives, and let me here state that our friends from the North, both Durham and Northumberland, on that Committee were keenly alive to the importance of amending that Bill and fought vigorously to make that Bill what we desired, a permanent Bill to ensure to the workman his compensation when the accident did happen. Let me say, it is not the intention in the Miners' Federation, or outside, or at any rate with me, that I should not acknowledge to the full that outside ourselves as Labour people, in this House on this particular matter, we had a lot of valuable and excellent friends who were as anxious as we were that this Workmen's Compensation Bill should be a complete success. All the friends you know do not go as far as we go, but we can never ourselves reap all the fruit, and we must acknowledge the services they rendered us. Again, all the men on that Committee were familiar with the defects in that Bill, and the Bill when it passes, when it becomes an Act, will reflect the presence of men who understood what they were doing. I hope that the House of Lords will deal fairly with it, and bear in mind that on this Committee were men who understood their business, and that compensation should be paid for accidents—all accidents that happen at the mines.

TRADES DISPUTE BILL.

The Trades Dispute Bill, which, by the way, has figured as the first question very largely before the election and since. The Taff Vale question had sufficiently impressed them for the need of it. He ventured to say that the mining community had not forgotten the Denaby and Cadeby question, and the great fight there. It was one of the interesting features of the year; the award this Federation

and Yorkshire Miners have secured by that victory; and, whatever may be the merits or demerits of the Law Lords, we recognise they are the final appeal; and, by a unanimous decision of these Lords, they reversed the previous decision given, that has caused so much anxiety and so much money: the pity it is that the great Unions are called upon to spend so much as they are. I hope the present Government will meet the wishes and the aspirations of the great Unions of this country when they pass the present Dispute Bill; and that great Unions and their Officials shall not be hampered and Societies mulct in great damages for doing what other people were doing constantly in their businesses. There is one thing that will be admitted by everybody, by people who have no sympathy with any form of Government will be prepared to admit, at any rate, this Government has elements of democracy that no other Government of modern times ever had; and this Government must clearly understand that the Trades Unions of the country and the 350,000 members of this Federation, will expect that, after all the pledges that have been given, that they will not be mere froth and sentiment, but will be loyal to them: if not, they will incur the displeasure of the great hosts of workmen throughout the country, who mean once and for all to be placed in at least as favourable a position as we were supposed to be in before the Taff Vale decision.

BILLS BEFORE PARLIAMENT.

I have not very much more to say this morning, but I should like to point out that during the short life of this Parliament many questions have been brought to the fore, questions that I personally am hopeful are going through. In getting them through the Miners' Federation will perform its duties in such a way that all these leading questions will follow side by side.

OLD AGE PENSIONS.

We discussed an Old Age Pension Scheme in the House of Commons, rather a different discussion to what had proceeded at previous Parliaments. The Miners' Federation and other workers realised everywhere the people would get their wish early if nations could only be kept from war and war entanglements that lies largely at the root of the financial difficulties of finding an old age pension. The Miners' Federation must be true, if to anything it must be true, to the old worn-out toilers, and redeem the fair name of Great Britain by giving the worn-out toilers of labour a fair share of the wealth of the nation.

FEEDING OF CHILDREN.—CHINESE SLAVERY.

The attention of Parliament has been called to the feeding of children and to the continued character of Chinese slavery in South

Africa. The Miners' Federation does not share the view that you can get round this question by mere verbiage to explain it away. Now what was slavery before the election and since the election is slavery to-day. At any rate there is no mistake of the Miners' Federation not making themselves clear on this great question.

RAILWAY SERVANTS.

The long hours of the Railway Servants had the attention of that House. I cannot conceive a body of workmen anywhere to whom I could more fully support. Men working such long hours and men walking the streets unemployed wherever long hours of labour exist is an anomaly which Parliament must find a remedy.

IMPRESSION OF PARLIAMENT AND LABOUR PARTY.

The convictions and arguments brought before the House on many questions go to prove that your Members, at any rate, are alive to all questions affecting the happiness and well being of the workmen, and as far as my own observation and my own experience has gone, there is no difficulty in acting with Labour representatives of all trades inside that House. All were agreed there can only be in this Country one Labour Party, it must be clear to everybody, we might not get it to-day or to-morrow, but we have a high regard for the solidarity of that Federation than to injure for a moment its usefulness. This question like all others will ripen and solve itself if we only take of ourselves and not destroy the hopefulness that is all round. Whilst we are generally agreed a Member of Parliament in the first place must represent the Constituency he is supposed to represent, they had made that discovery; at any rate he must represent the majority of people who sent him there. With regard to the reduction of armaments they would find that the full general labour vote was against the House on these and other questions that we shall have to face, if we faced them in a true spirit and so far as I am concerned, we shall be in common agreement. We are beginning more hopeful and better times; the past has been dark and it has been dreary; at times there has been little hope on the horizon, but the horizon to-day is full of hope, and if we only take care not to waste any of our strength by quarrelling, and not to fritter this spirit of unanimity by captious arguments for the sole purpose of opposition. Let us realise that every man does not see the questions as others see them. We ought to look all round these questions and let us realise the men that go there to represent the views of the men they represent, and let us feel that every step we take shall be a sure and solid step, moving forward to the goal. The conception and realisation may not come in our lifetime, but let us endeavour to ensure the happiness of those we represent, and when we leave this old world with all its troubles and faults, let us leave as a legacy to our children a better world than when we came into it.