
PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

DELEGATES AND NORTH WALES.

Mr. EDWARDS, M.P. : Well, now that brings us, from the Chairman's point of view, to a very interesting part of this Agenda, but one of those you feel happier as a rule when you have got through it. The next item is the President's Address. I would like to preface my remarks by saying that this is our first visit to this old City of Chester, and it has revealed an amount of activity in North Wales that we scarcely thought possible some few years ago, that North Wales would be represented with such a formidable array of Delegates at our Annual Conference.

THE FEDERATION—A REVIEW.

Let me say that I heartily welcome all the delegates and friends who are here. This meeting this morning has a peculiar fascination for me, because of the fact that we have our friends from the North with us in such full force. I could have wished our old friend, Mr. Burt, at the top end of this room, along with Mr. Wilson and Mr. Fenwick. I am sure all of those who have been stretching out their arms for so many years were glad to have them here this morning. It is among the many interesting changes that have taken place during the last year to all of us who valued unions, and who have valued it for all it was capable of doing. I always felt that there could not be complete satisfaction inside the Federation while any district, whether great or small, remained isolated and outside. We know from past history of Trades Unions in this country, many of them know you cannot expect everybody to do everything you do, and therefore they had tried to run rival Unions, and whether there were local Unions or national Unions, we have never been able to meet or deliberate in one combination, as we have long tried to do, as we are doing this morning; but it has always been our goal and the great desire in our Trades Unions to combine in one Union, and to be an example to other trades throughout the country. I am pleased to think this morning

that with the exception of two small wings, Cleveland and Forest of Dean, with those exceptions all the districts are members now with us in this great Federation. I may say that the Cleveland miners have already made an application, but can not, of course, be put on the Credential—have made application for 9,000 members—to this Conference to be made members before we close. Then there is the little, small out-of-the-way place in the Forest of Dean. I may say that as a colliery district, our Federation has always felt some amount of consideration for smaller people, and we are hoping before long they will fall into line and be able to do the work covered over the whole of the time instead of giving so much of it to organisation, and be able to effectively deal with the problems that have been lying near and about us, and which have been waiting for solution for so many years.

NATURE OF WORK AND WAGES.

Let me say in passing that the occupation represented in this room, as far as the past is concerned, has had more ebbs and flows than most other industries, and we had more, perhaps, to try the stamina, patience, and intelligence of that membership than other trades. It is true wages have risen in that trade and were much better and much higher to-day than at any period except in a mere boom. In fact, they are much higher than they have ever been during the history of this organisation. Of course, we have had a 5 per cent. reduction in the English Conciliation Board area, since we reached the highest point at the last Conference.

UNIONS AND STRIKES.

I think it is rather an evidence of the strength of our combination, to the value of these Unions, and it is an evidence of the intelligence of the men that they were able to accept it, that in these days of Conciliation Boards we are able to have a reduction in wages without throwing out the community with strikes and wasting your strength and resources from one end of the country to the other. We are all agreed, however desirous of clinging to the old weapon of strikes, that the greatest interests of the men, the greatest interests of our Unions, and the greatest interests of the community are best served in peace, and in these days I hope no great industry will inflict, if it is possible to get round it, such a hardship on the sufferers and the poorest of the poor by declaring strikes if by combination of Unions and intelligence they can find a better and healthier way out of any difficulty that may arise.

ACCIDENTS.

We have still the surroundings that have always clung round Conferences. Since my first recollection of Conferences we have had to deplore the enormous number of accidents that are taking

place. We had thought with increased intelligence, increased inspection, increased management from the top to the bottom, with men who more clearly understood the technical side and the practical side of this question, that we should have got rid very largely of the common occurrences of accidents in mines, but this year has witnessed such a crop of awful fatalities, I think much larger than any preceding for some time, whether it has been in the form of explosions in the pit, or whether in the form of inundations of water, both of them fearful to contemplate, or burning mines, or accidents in shafts. It has been a dreadful catalogue of disaster, and death has been the penalty that our men have been called upon to pay. I cannot resist the impression that much could be done to mitigate this terrible loss of human life, and whether discipline might appear harsh to the workmen or not, it is as well to acknowledge the fact that discipline among men as well as among managers is essentially necessary to save this awful waste of human life. I cannot conceive that great Unions, whatever may be done with the question of wages, whatever may be done with the question of hours, I cannot conceive that a great Union can use its power to a higher, nobler, and loftier purpose than to try to save the lives of the men who follow this industry. At any rate, we should give evidence of our watchfulness and care for the men we associate with, and when I look at the list of what has happened this year one begins to wonder whether we have got very far from where we were twenty or thirty years ago. We had explosions in Wales, Cumberland, Durham, in Somerset, and in the neighbourhood of Wigan, not more than thirty miles from where we are meeting, which was of the greatest magnitude, and some of us realise that the small number of slain is because the opportunity has hardly been there for the wholesale destruction you might have had unless greater care is exercised. Then I remember what has always occurred to me as the most serious side of the dark and sadder way out of this world into the next, and that is for men to be sent into the next world suddenly through an explosion of gas or the mine flooding with water whilst the men on the surface are following their usual occupations.

GOVERNMENT'S ACTION.

Then we have had three cage accidents resulting in sixteen men losing their lives. The death roll is a most serious one, and I want to suggest that this Conference will have a strong claim upon the Government itself to extend their operations of research and experiment rather than shutting up the bowels of compassion because you draw upon the Treasury a few thousand pounds. I have said—Mr. Smillie and my friend Mabon—that the Government did not treat the Commission appointed as fairly as they had a right to expect, because when serious experiments have had to be made we have had to go to the colliery owners themselves to put their hands in their pockets to bring about those results, and no Government

could fulfil the highest functions of a Government if it does not take into account all means possible for the saving of human life.

EIGHT HOURS.

It is not my intention this morning to entrench on your time in this close room very much longer, but there is so much lying round this question, however, we cannot leave this subject without mentioning that the Eight Hours is before the House of Commons. Of course, I know it is somewhat a thorny subject, but nearly every subject that aims for the elevation of the human race, and the uplifting of the human race, are all thorny. The questions of Eight Hours, shorter hours, reasonable hours for men and boys working underground, have always been from my earliest days a thorny subject; but the ideal we have had, which we are hoping soon to realise, that at any rate eight hours below ground is quite sufficient for a man or lad to work, not on paper, on theory, or a pious expression on paper, but as a matter of fact. But we are hoping that the Government Standing Committee—as they do to the Eight Hours—has to run the gauntlet of a Committee, where people who have grown somewhat alarmed of what may happen, and go so far as to tell a Committee of the House of Commons and the country that it means the death knell of human happiness and industry of this nation. The moment you get Eight Hours, we are told, they were going to raise the price of coal 5/- per ton. I don't know how much they will raise it, and another thing I don't care a deal, but I am desirous of having our Bill from Bank to Bank, and as to the amount of extra charge I am not sufficiently informed, and I have not met anybody who is sufficiently informed to tell us what might be the exact increase of the cost of output. Of course, at election times, when people were bidding for votes, everybody talks a lot at election times and some extraordinary things are said, but a man who stands on a waggon and says that the adoption of Eight Hours from Bank to Bank throughout Great Britain would increase the cost of production 5/- per ton is talking some silly stuff, and for the moment we can leave it there, as it is a matter of sufficient importance that the political party in the House of Commons or anywhere else can afford to let it rest. We are sanguinely hopeful before we meet again at the next Annual Conference that amongst the questions settled for the best will be the Eight Hours from Bank to Bank.

OLD AGE PENSIONS.

Since we last met, the Old Age Pensions we were pledged to in our annual reports, year in and year out, has become an Act, from which men will draw their pension in the early part of next year. Well, now, many of us felt disappointed that the age was fixed at seventy, but the disappointment I do not think will preclude us, at any rate, from expressing our sense of satisfaction that we

have made a start with old age pensions, and that hundreds of deserving people, not so many as we could wish, but hundreds of deserving people at the beginning of next year will obtain an old age pension. There is now a charm about the New Year, and we ought to welcome the gladness it will bring to crowds of old souls who have been looking forward to the promises made by Governments being fulfilled, and who have nearly lived out the whole of their days without realising. Of course, many of us have thought that sixty is high enough, as in an industry like our own the men of sixty commenced working below ground before ten years of age. If a man has given fifty years of his life, his youth and early manhood given up to the State, surely, after he has given the best years of his life, at the age of sixty he should not be sent to the Workhouse, or tossed to the scrap-heap in his declining years. I believe that the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and the other Trades Unions will agree that while the Act was a step in the right direction the age ought to be lowered, because men are worn out at sixty with the stress of these times—with the speed at which men worked in these days. After all, men are speeded up, and if they do not speed themselves up their environments and price-lists speed them up. Those who have to pay wages, on convenience, speed them up.

UNEMPLOYED.

I may be pardoned for referring to one of the saddest aspects of life just now: the number of men walking in the streets who cannot find work. Our own industry is comparatively free from that state of thing. I cannot say that we have no men out of work, but our Unions themselves can deal with the men everywhere. So far as our Federation is concerned, at any rate, I do know that whatever we may have in the way of unemployed, it is not so severe. But, while our men are more fully and regularly employed themselves, still this great combination feels that, after all, the crowd of men who are walking about without work is surely a question that claims their sympathy, and so far as the Miners' Federation of Great Britain is concerned, we feel keenly that something should be done to treat with this rather serious problem. I can conceive of no sadder chapter than that an honest, industrious man should tramp the streets and fail to find work because he had got down to where crowds of people were trying to doubt him. That, to my mind, is the bitterest aspect of the matter. I want to suggest that while this is a question that localities will deal with, it seems to me to be a very much bigger question than localities are capable of dealing with, and that no Government can afford to ignore this very important question of the number of men out of work. Neither can it be treated lightly. All well-meaning people are bound to bring to bear on this question all their experience and intelligence, so that we can place these men, not in the position of receiving charity as paupers, or breaking stones, or chopping wood, which is too silly to put intelligent men to. Surely, it is not too

much or beyond the intelligence and ingenuity of man to find a way out of this in these days, to find a better and healthier way, rather than have the humiliating factor of manufacturing criminals, or, on the other hand, manufacturing men of indolent habits who have not sought them, but have been thrown upon them owing to their surroundings and conditions, and not being able to find work.

LABOUR PARTY.

That brings me to what is immediately a question of our own time. I refer to the Resolution passed at the last Conference that a Ballot should be taken as to whether we should join forces with the Labour Party. Well, now, I have tried, as my friends know I have tried, in dealing with this question year in year and year out, to approach it in such a spirit that it should not shake or weaken our Union or forces of Combination from one end of the Kingdom to the other; neither should we breed bad blood in our ranks. We have all felt, since the commencement of our scheme, that we must try to find our feet with the Labour Party in this country and to deal with those great social problems, and I am not going into the question of the two great political parties, but I always feel that the miners will always welcome all good men and true in assisting them in these problems. However, when you come to remember the arguments and the complexity of opinion of the workmen, it becomes plain the moment you ask for a levy you would have to run a party purely labour, whilst you force a levy to carry out all the great questions of the Labour Party throughout the country. The ballot taken is not a satisfactory one, but I want to say a word or two. I think it is incumbent on the President—it is not satisfactory in the sense that the whole of the membership did not vote—of course, I don't know whether in this they are very much different in other societies, or any other party, or any other country. I don't know even when great issues were pending at elections you don't get everybody to vote, and the vote that is polled is at any rate the vote that stands. Well, now, an honest attempt has been made by the Executive to carry out loyally the resolution of the Conference that the vote should be taken. Circulars were sent out, and ample voting sheets sent to everybody who applied for them, and I think no one will impute to Mr. Secretary Ashton that anyone was neglected, but that they got their voting sheets as they required them. Of course, we recognised we could not get everybody to vote; everybody has not voted. A vote has been taken, and there is a majority of those taken, and it does seem to me that thereon we are called upon to act, as we have always acted, on these majority votes. I should like to say a word as to our Federation Rules. Nowhere in the rules is the question touched upon—the question of majorities, as to what should constitute a clear majority. There are societies connected with this Federation whose rules laid it down that there must be a two-thirds majority in favour of any particular change. Well, in this Federation we

have no rule. Of course, I ought to say, as one who was in at the early inception, everybody felt that you do not want the ropes too tightly drawn and frighten everybody, and in all cases that have been called into question in our Conferences have been decided by majorities. During the week you will have an opportunity of discussing this question, as you always do, in good temper and fairness, but it does seem to me on that vote taken, to go back upon it, to my mind it would create distrust, irritation, and annoyance in the minds of crowds of men who honestly believe that this vote is what everybody intended.

AGENDA.

Well, now, the Agenda before you for the week bristles with question germane to the occupation and work of those whom they represented. I hope you will bring to bear, as we have in years gone by, not only all our experience and all our wisdom we have gained, but all the patience we have developed before this Conference closes, so that it should not close with rancour, because to my mind the progress at our Conferences has been unnecessarily impeded by wranglings which could we have seen beforehand we should have avoided. I often have the feeling of an old stager in this chair, but I have had no ground of complaint as to what has happened whilst I have sat in this chair. I have tried my friends more than once, but my greatest desire has been ever since we lost our old friend Mr. Pickard to bring together by hook or by crook all the forces of labour in connection with mining in one Union, and when we realise that with our forces well organised we will seek to make this old fatherland, with all its faults, we love so well a happier and better place for our children than it was for ourselves.
