

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

TRIBUTE TO OLD TRADES UNIONISTS.

Mr. E. EDWARDS, M.P., President. Friends, old ones and young ones, my vocabulary is not capable of expressing the pleasure I feel in standing on this platform in this City at a Miners' Demonstration, at a Miners' Conference.

DELEGATES: We are unable to hear a word.

Mr. E. EDWARDS: Gentlemen, if you will keep your seats and there is no other speaker in the Conference except the President, I think you will be able to hear what I have got to say. I know it is not the best of rooms for hearing, but we have got to make the best of it, but I think you will be able to hear me. Well now gentlemen, I was trying to express my feelings in language that as yet I have not been able to realise or grip for myself. I could not remembering my own physical condition a few months ago, remembering I am able to stand here at another Annual Conference, remembering where the Conference is held, remembering the Conference we had the last time we were here and remembering the bitter feeling there had been between some of us, and some of us, for a long time, and remembering here we are in the home of a very old friend of all the lot of us. We are in the centre of great Industries, where this principle of Unions, which is so largely represented here in this Conference this morning has had an active vigorous life for many many years. Remembering that, it gives me pause to realise where I must place my feet to be just to those who have built up this great movement, who are sometimes apt to be forgotten because they are older. I realise here that the old National Union, the head of which was our good friend Mr. Macdonald, and another stalwart in Mr. Crawford in those days, with Mr. Burt, they held the flag of these Unions before the birth of this Organisation which is so robust here this morning. In those days there were rivals in the old National Association and the Amalgamated Union which took root further South in the mining communities of this country, notably throughout South Wales, Lancashire, some portions of Staffordshire and others. In these days we have the English section, Welsh section and Scotch section. Let me say, I do not hesitate to pay a tribute from this platform, while many of us have lived to realise this great Union while we were exceedingly weak and unable to do anything, these two Northern Counties were an example to the whole lot of us, whether we come from Scotland, Wales, or any other part of England, and I personally this morning, have no hesitation in paying a tribute to the men of the North for keeping the flag aloft when other people failed.

MINERS' FEDERATION—COMMENCEMENT.

Coming to our own movement. A Conference was held at Manchester in 1888. The Conference was ostensibly called for the purpose of raising wages, not a discreditable motive after all, in trying to raise wages upon which so much of the happiness and comfort of our members depend. I call to mind at that Conference, which was represented by the Midland Section, and Yorkshire, who have always been a great robust county and always ready to fight. At that Conference in Manchester, I am reminded of a little incident. One of the Delegates advocated that we should try to get Scotland, Wales, and the North of England with us before we moved. A dry old Lancashire Delegate, since gone to his rest said "If you are waiting for them, then you will be waiting twenty years." That is twenty years ago, twenty years ago we realised in that Conference that it was possible to make one great Union. Although other Unions failed, that was no reason why we should fail, once we all realised we were engaged in a common cause, whether it is in Wales or Scotland or England, there was no reason whatever to doubt our success and the growth of the Federation is realised here in the 600,000 members, which holds a position for itself unique in all the Unions of Great Britain, and I should be inclined to think with my somewhat limited knowledge of all the Unions outside of Great Britain, for completeness and for strength, for steady, quiet, consistent growth this last twenty years has drawn together all the sectional Unions. Local jealousies there would always be, because there are particular methods. Everybody knew that in building up any great cause, some districts on some questions, and some on others are called upon to give way. You can only build up a great Union on the principle of give and take. Local autonomy will always be more or less desirable, and no one could conceive for a moment this great Union being controlled and conducted through and through by the same rules, the same regulations, the same methods, if so, we must first of all begin to reform Society at the base, and place all men under similar conditions.

WAGES AND AGREEMENTS.

What we have done, at least, I think we have realised it, we have a common agreement in the main to lift the basis or standard of the workmen's wages. It seems to me that that is most desirable in itself and could not have been accomplished without this great organisation had been drawn together, and while little districts, smaller districts, will have methods peculiar to themselves, that does not destroy the possibility of having one great fundamental principle always before us, to raise the wages, whether it is in a thin coal district or a thick coal district, whether it is in a small or large district, to raise wages, the daily wages of the workmen, from one

end of the kingdom to the other. In our wages agreements we have made, which, by the way, let me say, were not possible when we formed this Federation to get one agreement under which many large counties, aggregation of counties, worked to-day, and which would never have been made to-day were it not for this great powerful organisation. Years ago we tried to make them but failed. We did make some sort of agreement, but they never conceded to the workmen what we all held to be right. We have not yet succeeded in getting or securing for the workmen all we conceive is right, but, constitutionally, we are making great headway, and I think you will all be in harmony with me when I say it has always occurred to me that the most important phase of this question is to lift the basis of wages everywhere. A mere advance of wages when times are good may be worth something, but it is far more important to seek to raise the basis upon which a man should be paid so that whether trade is brisk or otherwise it would ensure a man of a decent wage for the work he has to perform. Of course, we shall not realise it yet I know, and I am not for the moment anxious to mix up my observations as to what may be the economic view held outside this Miners' Federation, but I think we stand fairly well now with our 600,000 members. We stand as we did when we met in Manchester plus 50 per cent. Surely that in itself is convincing proof of the utility of great Unions and the power of great Unions, and what it is capable of accomplishing, and of all these questions the wages question will ever live with us while we have the present condition of things. At any rate, somehow or other it will always be necessary to receive in wages sufficient purchasing capacity to make the homes of our members much happier than they would be for lack of means.

SHORTER HOURS.

Now, let me refer to the shorter hours, which is one of those matters on which I may be met with other opinions in this room, but no one will doubt my desire at any rate to extend to everybody the same charity that I am expecting will be tendered to myself. To my mind the eight hours question is a question upon which less objection can be sustained than on the wages question itself, because by the operation of shorter hours it is a principle you can apply to pits either north, east, west, or south. It is a principle that you can apply when the coal is ten yards thick or when the coal is two yards thick. The principle can be applied to any pit where the men and boys are buried below ground. That has always been one of the main planks of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain—the application of this principle to all toilers underground. Of the principle itself scarcely anybody objects, but like many more things in this world the objection comes when we try to practice it. That eight hours for men and boys underground is long enough everybody readily assented, but to come to put it into practice it was said it

was impossible, you would ruin the world. Employers in general were unanimous so far as I know against the Miners' Eight Hours Bill. Of course we shall have to do without them if we cannot get their consent or assent on this question agreeably. We shall follow on under the law that has secured to us, at any rate, secures to hundreds and thousands of men, secures to them two hours a day less underground. Of course it may be said it will interfere with someone. Well, while the Union is big enough it very likely will not. However, that is not a matter I had better discuss from this platform, but outside these employers said that however desirable it was not practicable. Then, of course, they said it could not be done. Well, it has been done, and the commercial and economic side has adjusted itself without panic. I pause here because I see the papers are full of all that is going to happen now we have got the Eight Hours Act. I do not want to think less of the human race because of their attitude on this matter, because there are a lot of people who wish other people well, yet I think if they really wish to hold our respect they would leave this question alone and leave it to the men who work underground, because the great crowd of men who have to say so much about it do not work underground and do not understand it. At any rate, the great Union that was called into existence two years ago, called the

COAL CONSUMERS LEAGUE,

and we are all coal consumers more or less. This League declared in the country, declared in the House of Commons, that it will lead to an increase of 5s. per ton in coal, yet there are millions of tons of coal got and filled and put out for one-third that price, and all the money that is paid to the men is for the amount they fill, and I may say there are millions of tons of coal produced and sent out to-day at 1s. 6d. per ton—millions of tons, and yet we hear we shall get an increase of 5s. per ton, which would, of course, have been a remarkable thing if it had happened. It has happened that this great Society, that boasted so much, stands to-day before the country discredited. Their prophecies have not been fulfilled. Many of us said they never would be, but for the moment we are a little surprised that the markets are so extraordinarily low, prices so low notwithstanding the passage of the Miners' Eight Hours Bill. However the victory, whatever our children may think twenty years from now, the victory is secured to us. It has not been so easy since we got it, but still we have held our own, and we have proved at any rate in this first united battle we have had—the first united battle—we have proved what we have never attempted to prove before, what we are capable of doing with this great Union. Then you know that Scotland with its special troubles, and Wales with their troubles followed, and in both these cases this Federation need not blush for the line of action it took—it need not at all be ashamed as to what has been the outcome of it.

POWER OF THE FEDERATION AND STRIKES.

Great possibilities lie in the future of this Federation, and the enormous power that we have acquired so steadily must be used wisely and well. We stand on the threshold of great possibilities, and while preserving the interests of our members, we must ever remember the interests of other workers whose living depends upon this great industry. This great Union may set an example to the big Unions or little Unions throughout the country, and so far as I know the main principles underlying this Federation, the main reasons why it exists is that the men's wages may be preserved, the men's lives protected and that in the common race of life there may be a greater recognition of the arduous duties and dangerous duties than there has been up to now, and in doing that, we must seek to do it on the lines of our latest exploits, by conciliation, whatever it may cost, by conciliation rather than by strike. Round this Society during its history, there has grown up many institutions for the good of the miners which would have been impossible but for the conciliation underlying all the movements of this Federation, and has enabled men to continue at their employment, because there have been times when men have been called upon to strike, and I should be sorry to see that weapon taken from the miners; I should be very sorry, at the same time, I feel it an obligation upon me when called upon to address my fellows here, there and everywhere, that this weapon, we will only use when all other weapons have failed. The strength of our position will always be in the intelligence of this great Union, in its members, in its finance, and in the wisdom it develops, and its care for all those outside, and above all we must be true to one another, North, South, East and West, and then not very much that is wrong will happen either with us or anybody else.

LABOUR PARTY.

Since our last Annual Conference the affiliation fees and contributions have been paid by the Federation as members of the Labour Party. That, during the years that have preceded, has caused some little heartburnings and some little misunderstandings, but we have paid our entrance fee and we are now members. The ballot first of all decided our course of action, and as a great democratic union, and people who were always preaching—trust the people—always preaching it, it was the only course to follow to honour the ballot, and now we stand one with the Labour Party in Parliament. No party calling itself Labour would have been complete without the miners, and this fusion, I doubt not, will be for the good of the miners of the country, and, as a class, stand shoulder to shoulder to mitigate the wrongs and to create a brighter world. Old fashioned I am in some things, and I believe there are

great possibilities in this world for the men, women and children. We have taken this step, and, let me say, I hope there will be no desire in any way to appear vindictive to men who have strong views and who have given their whole life for the cause we esteem so much, for I am persuaded that only that policy which we have pursued since I have been in this chair has brought about this unanimous feeling amongst all of us, whether we see eye to eye or not, that our true and correct place in the politics of this country was in the Labour Party, which stood for labour. More than once I have tried to advise my friends in Conferences, and we have got through, what it would not have been possible a few years ago without weakening or destroying. This has always been my fear, without weakening or destroying the influence of this great Federation, which has taken so many years to build up.

ACCIDENTS IN MINES.

We must seek by all the power we have now to direct our attention to the appalling, still appalling number of accidents constantly occurring in our mines. We must direct our efforts to try and reduce these accidents, which everybody must admit are far too frequent, and while not seeking to blame those who have charge of this vast number of lives, we do think that much yet may be done, much might be done by the Government of the country, who appointed a Royal Commission, and surely out of their exhaustive reports we shall seek to incorporate something in the mining laws. Whatever might be the cause, a lot of human life has been sacrificed, and I am satisfied that much of it might have been saved. It may be we shall be called upon to advise our own membership to exercise greater care themselves, but much more might be done by the Legislature of this country before we have reduced to a minimum those injuries which happen, many of which are so sad and so saddening, and with all the value we get from the Workmen's Compensation Act, with all the value to the home after the breadwinner has gone, of the few shillings weekly, still dearer beyond all that is human life itself, and whatever questions we may differ upon we shall not differ upon this, and all the strength of this great Union, all its experience, the whole history of it, should be brought to bear upon this point in order to try to mitigate the loss that is taking place. I cannot conceive of a greater work where any man can be engaged. The work commends itself from the highest possible standpoint, that of seeking to save human life, to protect it against so much injury, so much sorrow, and so much suffering. While this great Union lives for the men who are living, we will not be unmindful of our comrades in the day of death, and our duty to their children, so that the children who shall follow will realise that their fathers lived, not in vain, to make our great fatherland a better world to live in.