

## PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

## CHANGES IN FIFTY YEARS.

Mr. E. EDWARDS, M.P.: Gentlemen, the next item on the programme is the President's address, and having regard to the importance of the agenda, and the number of subjects to be discussed, that address will be a short one from the platform this morning, but it will be none the less expressive of the feelings one entertains towards a body of men that I have known for so many years. Let me say I very cordially echo the sentiments of the Mayor in welcoming all the delegates to this place. I am delighted with the gathering, and if the predictions we have had in the press and otherwise this last few weeks are fulfilled, we shall have a very interesting Conference. I call to mind this is the 3rd of October, and fifty years ago to-day I commenced my pit life. It is a long way back, and when I remember that morning and this morning, when I remember those surroundings and these surroundings, I have no need to suggest to you for a moment that there is a great change. I do not wish to claim any sort of antiquity in this particular direction, but it is rather interesting to myself personally to find that after fifty years in following one of the most hazardous and dangerous occupations, and looking all along the line from that day, notwithstanding this critical age, I venture to suggest from this platform that we have moved a long way since that day.

## BOYS' QUESTION.

Changes have taken place, notably in the length of hours that boys particularly in the past were called upon to work. The older men will understand what I mean when I say while the lads now, to-day, have not found a paradise by no means, their lot is much more pleasant than the lot of lads fifty years ago, without any restrictions as to hours when nobody particularly cared for the lads in those days. I am pleased to think that one outcome of the many and varied efforts made to improve the condition of things in pits, is the lot of boys, which, at any rate, is much better than it was at that time. Much remains to be done, and I take it that this Federation before it has completed its work, and during its completion will take great care that the question of the lads throughout this kingdom are attended to.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS.

No one can look at this Congress for a moment but feels inspired for the future of the men that we represent here. We know it is going to be a difficult task. It is our business at any rate to take care, though difficult it may be, that we keep ever before us, simply

and purely the interests of the men we represent, and that nothing else will stand between us in discharging those duties what we conceive to be in the highest interests of the men who are engaged in this particular calling. When I remember what has been achieved by the Federation, looking along the vista back a few years when separate districts were holding their separate Conferences all over Great Britain, and there was no opportunity given us in those days of meeting each other face to face whether in Durham, in Northumberland, or Scotland, or in the Midlands, or South Wales, all our Conferences, all our meetings were held separately. Of course, back in the days when we had the old National Union, their power was not very great in those times, but never till this Federation was created was there any prospect of bringing all these varied and complex interests into one fold as we can do now. I want to suggest here, after all the work and after all the toil, do not you make a mistake, in the early days of this Society there was a great deal of toil, worry and anxiety, and it would be a pity after achieving such a great and glorious victory among ourselves, if we allowed anything to come in to break that Union, that harmony which up to now has prevailed. I cannot conceive where our objects, our aims are all one, surely, I cannot conceive any question upon which we can so sharply divide ourselves as to imperil for one moment the honour, the strength and character of this great organisation. I am looking optimistically, I am looking to the deliberations this week in the full and sure hope. I will put it knowing as I do my friends, in the full and sure hope, that these deliberations will be carried on in that spirit, not to destroy or weaken, but to solidify and strengthen this great combination.

#### WAGES QUESTION.

We have been dealing with the wages question here, there, and everywhere, and after all the wage is a very important factor, one is made to realise that day by day, that the wage question is still an important factor, and while wages and conditions of men generally have improved, it may be said with equal truth, there is a great deal as yet in connection with the mining life of our men, the relations between the employers, and the wages received, there is a great deal to be done. During the last few days we have been actively asserting a principle which has been fought for years and years, stripped of all its paint and colouring, we are brought back to what was the origin of nearly all unions, the right of a man to his wages after he has worked. Well, now, I do not know that the Federation has ever sought to carry this question beyond the absolute right of a man when performing a day's work, to expect his day's wage. Our methods of work and system of work which are so various, and I was going to say complexed, but, however, they may vary, and very often misunderstood, the conditions under which the men work are misunderstood, I think the general public as informed through the press is often misunderstood. Very largely, all coal is got in this

country by contract, and I venture to state, as I once stated elsewhere, and I repeat from this platform that it has redounded to the credit both of the men and employers that they have been enabled under such difficulties to fix a contract at all, and what we have been trying to drive at is, however the contracts may be fixed, they shall yield to the workmen every day a day's wage. I do not know that we should be particularly anxious about what name it shall be called, we are all more anxious on the Saturday men shall find their money in the pay box, and let me say here, there need be no ambiguity about this, one of the first planks in the Federation platform, for a man young or old employed in a pit there should be guaranteed to him a day's wage when he has done his work. Well, now, surely the world outside is not going to blame us, we are only anxious to hold up before the public generally this fact. It is not sufficient to tap the sympathy of a great community in the face of a great calamity, we rather want the community to realise that colliers after all are not pirates, but that we were seeking legitimately, honestly and fairly to get a day's wage after they had done a day's work. I myself shall not shrink from stating bare, the bold, naked fact, that is the position that this Federation is taking up, that is exactly what we are after, that a man shall be assured of a wage that will enable him to pay his shop bill and keep himself respectable after having done his work.

#### STRIKES.

I know that round this question there are all sorts of stories. It is suggested we are hastening fast to a strike. Well, anyone who knows me know full well if there is an opponent to strikes he is on this platform; if there is an opponent to any sort of war he is here on this platform, unless it is a war against the wrong one meets with everywhere. I have yet faith enough to believe that there is sufficient intelligence and strength in this great Union, and let me hope sufficient on the other side to recognise the case we are putting, that we may be able to settle the question we are dealing with without plunging the nation into a strike. I cannot believe the collier wants a strike for the sake of a strike, and I think the time has come when we should make that clear. We have been setting an example to many trades up to now in trying to deal with these questions, and I am still of the opinion that the general permanent good of all men will be much better served by agreements that can be entered into by the employers and ourselves, given the strength of great Unions to follow it; but by the position which is being taken up now, I have as much right to suggest, and I do suggest from this platform, that while we are not anxious to precipitate an open attack with all its horrors and consequences, I do feel inclined yet, I feel this Conference would be justified in forcing up to the hilt this question now raised—the question of demanding payment of a wage week by week.

## MINERS AND THEIR WORK.

I am told commensurate with the work a man does, well it is a difficult thing to fix a measure for the work he does, I rather prefer with my knowledge of men to think that after all the great army of miners in this country have given full value for the wages they receive. There may be, of course, a man or two amongst the miners, as there are amongst all classes of men, who shirk their duty sometimes; there is no reason to attempt to fasten on to the great mass of men in this country this business of shilly-shallying, dallying and shirking their obligations. The great mass of miners never did shirk their obligations. The great mass of miners will not shirk their obligations to-day. I think in this enlightened age it is monstrous that we have to stand on a platform and plead for a settlement of the question that when a man has fulfilled his contract and done his work under exceedingly difficult circumstances he should get his wages for that toil. I do not propose anticipating the discussion of this Federation. I think you will excuse me from dealing with it. No one has attempted to muzzle the President. We have been fairly good friends—and will be, so far as I am concerned, up to the end of the chapter.

## SUBJECTS ON AGENDA AND OBJECTS.

You will observe the various questions on the Agenda. We cannot be charged with wandering to the end of the earth to find topics; we have got nearer home, and we have done so because it is the desire of everybody associated with this Association. We should seek day by day, week by week, and year by year, to improve the lot of the men we represent.

## MINES BILL.

Since we met at the last Conference, as you know already, the new Mines Bill, introduced by the Government in the early part of the year, has passed through the Committee stages. There have been several Conferences held, and amendments have been urged in that Committee, and now the Bill has left the Committee it scarcely carries with it what we should have liked to see. But it is an improvement, a considerable improvement and strengthened as against the Bill that was brought in by the Government. Let me say from this platform I regret exceedingly that a division amongst our own ranks has destroyed the value of the bathing clause in that Bill, as we understood it, and three of us on this platform who have given considerable attention to this, and let me say—it is due to me to say—especially my friend Mr. Smillie, to this particular question. It was regrettable that we were unable to fight this through because of the division, and because of the feeling of the miners themselves.

However, that is the position as you know, subject to a ballot of the men at the various collieries, and it is provided that the total cost to the employers and the workmen shall not be more than threepence per week. Well I do not intend to expatiate on this Bill this morning. We shall have an opportunity when it comes before the House of Commons on report stage of dealing with it, and following our usual custom Districts will send their representatives there, and I am satisfied that you will give no uncertain sound on all the special phrases of the Bill which makes for safety and security of the men, that after all is the primary thing, and we must press upon the Government to strengthen those clauses. We have got to use, let me say, and I say it quite earnestly from this platform, we have got to use our best influences with the men themselves, that they must see, for if the appalling loss of life is to be reduced seriously in mines, the workmen themselves must be taught at any rate to observe the rules meant for safety, and that they themselves must become ordinary policemen to guard against any possible dangers that are lurking round.

#### OSBORNE JUDGMENT.

Although we have had many promises from the Government we have not got a reversal of the Osborne judgment, although payment of members has made it less difficult. I take it the miners are in agreement with other Trades Unions that the government of Unions should be rather by the Unions, and I do not think that we shall feel we have discharged our duty to our fellows if we in any way slacken one jot in our efforts to free our Societies from what after all is an unfair position to place us in, to say the least of it.

#### FEDERATION AND OUTSIDE INFLUENCE.

Well, now having regard to the length of the agenda let me say with these few observations that I have expressed to you and perhaps I am one of the optimistic men in this Conference, I am impressing upon you to keep before our men clearly and distinctly what are the main objects of this Federation, and allow no outside influence of any sort, either from the Employers or otherwise to weaken or destroy this great Federation that has cost so much to build, but to seek to use its powers for the general good of men and boys associated with this industry, and so that the families of the miners at any rate, may take their proper accredited position amongst the artisans of this country, and better able to carry out the obligations which society imposes upon them in seeking to serve this great community. We shall at any rate in seeking to serve this great community of a million workers and their families, make this Conference in Southport memorable from the fact, come what will, blow the wind which way it will, we will be true to ourselves and to our Unions.