

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS.

IMPORTANCE OF LAST YEAR.

Mr. R. SMILLIE: Gentlemen, I had not intended to deliver anything in the shape of a Presidential Address at this meeting under the circumstances, but the Secretary has instructed me that I must make a speech this morning, and that I must not speak too long. The Press have told me, the representatives of the Press, that the public outside are expecting something to be said this morning, and to oblige the representatives of the press, for whatever the newspapers say about us we are often indebted to the gentlemen of the Press for putting our speeches in order with respect to correct grammar, and sometimes we have reasons to thank these gentlemen. Mr. Ashton never speaks unless he has something to say, and he has told me that I ought not to make a very long speech now, but let me first of all this morning, on behalf of the Officials of this Federation, heartily welcome all the delegates to this Twenty-third Annual Meeting of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. The year which has passed has been the most momentous I think in the history of our whole movement, not even excepting that terrible year, 1893, when the first promoters of this Federation then laid the foundation stone of this great movement. In 1893 you were face to face with a terrible wages struggle. That was an epoch making time in your history, but I think we may venture to say that the year ending at this Conference has been of even greater importance perhaps than the year 1893.

LATE PRESIDENT.

During this year we have lost the services of our respected and esteemed President. He was taken away from us at a time probably when we could least afford to dispense with his services, at a time when we had just finished our strike, and at a time when many of us feared there might be considerable difficulty in keeping united together the forces of this Federation. I have had an opportunity at an International Meeting and also a Conference of the Federation of referring to the loss of Mr. Edwards. To many in this meeting the death of Mr. Edwards removed a wise and dear personal friend. The movement itself through his death has lost a wise adviser, a man who had done a great deal, not only to help to establish this great movement, but to keep the movement together. As I said at the last Conference it behoves those who are really anxious for the future prosperity of this movement, it behoves us to consider that it is our duty to increase our anxiety and enthusiasm for the movement because of the loss we have sustained. It will require all the more effort on the part of those who are left when men like Mr. Edwards are taken from our midst.

STRIKE AND RESULTS.

The year which we are closing now brought us face to face with our general strike. I am not going to deal to-day with that movement at any length. We will be getting reports this week which will probably put us in a better position to judge as to whether or not any real benefit was conferred on the mine workers of this country by that movement, but I venture to say that even now it is not too early to learn some lessons from that strike. I think in a great movement of that kind it would be largely a loss to us if we did not profit by the lessons which it may have given us. I think that one of our first duties is to endeavour to find out whether or not any of the lessons we have got from that strike may help us in the future.

SUFFERERS BY STRIKE.

Well, one thing I think, as I have already said in a different place, is clear, there is one lesson we have got from our strike, whoever may have suffered through the strike the coal masters certainly did not suffer. We have always recognised that during a dispute no matter how widespread, no matter how long continued, that the employers in whatever industry they are they do not suffer hunger during that dispute, and in this case not only did the colliery owners not reach the point of hunger, but I am inclined to think that financially they were considerably better off for the strike having occurred. There was, however, considerable suffering in the country, and that suffering was not only amongst the miners but the poorer classes of the people in this country who really had no connection with the dispute at all. I think that has always been the case and probably will be so long as industries are carried on under the present system, because in any dispute, great or small, it is our people that will have most of the suffering so far as hunger is concerned.

NATIONALISATION.

There is another lesson, I think, which we ought to learn from that strike. We have been passing resolutions for many years at these Annual Meetings saying that the time had come when the mining industry should be in the hands of the Government, and should be worked by the Government on behalf of the whole nation. Well, I think that dispute must have, or at least ought to have, brought this nation a little bit nearer to State ownership of the mines. It is perfectly clear that the mine owners of this country proved that, at least, although they are usually good patriots at election times or in times of war, they care more about profits than they do about patriotism. They did not seem to show any deep concern for this nation during that dispute, but resented, I think,

quite as much as some of the miners leaders did, the interference of the Government in the dispute. The mining industry is of far too great importance to the nation as well as to the millions of workers who are working in and about mines; it is of far too great importance to leave it much longer, I think, in the hands of private individuals, whose chief, if not their entire interest, was to make profits and fortunes out of it. That has driven us to this position. You will be called upon to consider a Bill for the Nationalisation of Mines—called upon to consider it this week—a Bill that has been prepared by your Executive. You will be entitled to go over it clause by clause. You have already affirmed the principle, and now you will have to affirm the details or amend the details, and to set on foot in the very near future a vigorous agitation for State ownership of mines. If that is accomplished, the strike will at least have had its useful side to that extent.

LOYALTY OF THE MEN.

I should like to say, in connection with that, just a word. I say personally on behalf of the Federation that I wish to give public utterance of our thanks to the rank and file of the miners' movement for their splendid loyalty and courage during that dispute, I am sure that never in the industrial history of the world was there anything like the splendid enthusiasm and loyalty displayed through a dispute. There has been fault found with the leaders, but I have never found a dispute yet where fault has not been found with the leaders, whether there is any truth in it or not, but nobody can say anything else but that the rank and file of our movement displayed a courage and devotion to this Association and to the cause of labour that could not be surpassed, and will probably never be surpassed in the history of industrial warfare.

STATE OF TRADE.

I would like to say to the general public that the price of coal has gone up, and I would like to let them know that the price of coal will continue up. The employers say that every piece of legislation, every piece of legislation either closely connected with the mines or legislation generally, places a burden on the employers. That may be taken so far as the mines are concerned, and that the additional burden will be put on the price of coal, and the general public and who are the consumers of coal must pay the increased cost. I sincerely hope the employers will stick to that. There is a tendency on the part of the employers to endeavour to make the wages of the worker suffer for any additional cost, for any additional cost through legislation concerning safety, and beneficent legislation and other matters, which the commodity consumed is entitled to bear, and not the person who produces it. Now no person

need for a moment suggest at this meeting that the addition of 2d. or 3d. a ton which has been placed on the cost of coal by the recent legislation, by the Mines Act, and the Insurance Act, that an addition of 3d. or 4d. a ton being placed on the price, has made it necessary for a permanent rise in the price of coal from 1s. 6d. to 2s. per ton. The public will find, or we shall find, probably at the end of the next financial year where that additional burden has gone to. The probability is that it will be found in the enormous dividends which will be paid for the next year or two by the colliery owners of this country. We do not wish to see the price of coal being lowered to a point at which the employers could not pay reasonable wages to the underground workers, but we do say that the public in a matter of this kind are entitled to be protected against mere dividend hunting which will only obtain when we take over the mines.

SAFETY.

Now I would like to deal just as briefly as possible with the fact that we are reminded from time to time, year by year, of the terribly dangerous and hazardous nature of coal mining. These matters have been dealt with at our own meetings and international meetings. We have recently had the Cadeby Colliery, where there were two explosions following each other, and a considerable number of our fellow workers were sent into Eternity. A short time ago a New Mines Regulation Act was passed, but it is too early yet to say it will lessen fatal or non-fatal accidents underground. We must wait and see if there is any considerable change, then if this legislation is not sufficiently drastic, we must see that proper legislation is adequately carried out. I do not agree at all that the present slaughter is inevitable, because there are a number of accidents which might be prevented if proper legislative means were taken in order to carry that out. We cannot at the moment either condemn or approve of the more recent mining legislation, as to whether or not it has the effect of reducing to any degree the terrible death and accident roll in this country.

SYNDICALISM.

I am going to carry out Mr. Ashton's instructions to the letter, but there is one matter which I want to speak of here to-day, a matter of public interest. During last year a great deal has been said about the new movement in this country. There has been a great deal of discussion about the question of Syndicalism, the wealthy classes and employing classes, many of them, have gone to bed in fear and trembling in case the following morning they might wake up, figuratively speaking, with their commercial throats cut, and many of the leaders of the Trades' Union movement are

haunted night after night with the nightmare of Syndicalism, with the feeling that Syndicalism is going to ruin the Trades' Union movement of this country. The capitalist classes will not have their throats cut without a struggle; I want to say that they need not be afraid, Trades' Union leaders of this country may possess their souls in patience, Syndicalism is not going to ruin Trades' Unionism. I want to advise this Conference, I want to advise the Trades' Unions that the movement is not in any danger. I do not think we ought to condemn a thing merely for its name. I remember a time in the early days of this movement that those who proposed there ought to be for miners a minimum living wage fixed at a point that would keep a miner and his family in a state of comfort, irrespective of prices, and that that should be the first charge on the price of a ton of coal, and that the value of the coal should be determined in order that the worker should secure a reasonable wage. I remember that was referred to again and again as practically a conspiracy to wipe out the employing classes, and that it was ridiculous to think of. Competition, it was said, should fix wages, that of course, was not ridiculous at all. I remember that Socialism at one time was very unpopular amongst the Miners' Federation delegates, that many of the comrades who have advocated this were looked upon as socially ruined, men without faith, men without truth, men who went about with bombs in their pockets, and I am sorry to say that men outside who knew better encouraged that opinion. Now that was not, and never has been, the Gospel of Socialism. The Gospel of Socialism in this country was not that all people should be made equal and divide the wealth of this country, but that they should have an equal opportunity of life with others; that was all the object. I think that is the highest ethical standard in which to approach it, to have equal opportunities of life. I have heard and read a great deal about Syndicalism, and I do not fully understand Sydicalism yet. I have heard it put in this way, that Syndicalism meant that men working in various industries organised for the purpose of taking over these industries, and working them for the sake of the members of those industries, and to secure them without nationalisation or paying for them, and in order to secure them the workers had to ca-canny, they should shorten the hours of labour, and so far as possible limit the production, so far as possible increase their wages up to the highest point in order to make it impossible to carry on the industry, and when they got possession of the mines to take over the trade and work the industry for themselves independent of their fellows in other industries. Now if that is Sydicalism, I am against it, because in my opinion that is individualism run mad, and that would not draw together the workers of this country in one common cause, to improve the whole, but would simply go to improve my own particular trade. I understand that is not really and truly sydicalism in the form which it has been advocated. If Syndicalism really means the organising of every industry into a common organisation, into an organisation common to that class,

and the organising of that trade or that trades union with the trades unions of other trades into so far as possible a common trades union of all the workers of this country, that an organisation should be formed not only of this country, but internationally, if necessary, and that in the meantime there is necessity for improving the machinery of our trades union movement, if that is syndicalism then I do not think that many of us need object to it. Personally at least I feel that the time has come when a forward movement should be made to widen the influence of our trades unions. I am not one of those who think that the power for good of the trade union movement is finished, I am one of those who think that the power to improve the conditions of the people by trades union effort is only starting, but I believe it must be through a closer connection of all the trades unions together. I am old enough to remember the great upheaval of the nineties when a movement took place on behalf of labour in this country, I am old enough to remember that with the exception of the miners most people looked upon unskilled labourers in a different manner. I held a different opinion myself, with the exception of the miners, the trades union movement, the highly skilled, looked down on street labour and casual labour as altogether different from other men until the movement of the ninety's came, when the disorganised casual labour in that movement brought up unskilled casual labour to an equal footing as the skilled labour. Let me say that the very fact that we can hold a Conference with 150 delegates representing 600,000 members I do not think we have to be afraid of the mere name of Syndicalism. The men who advocated Syndicalism are men in most cases who earnestly believed that the trades unionists have not been able to make sufficient progress.

A DELEGATE: I doubt it.

The CHAIRMAN: I at least believe that, until we can prove otherwise. They think we have not made sufficient progress, and in all probability think that if they were in the front rank they could have made greater progress. Personally looking backward I do not think they could, but still they might be of that opinion. Let me say that personally I am not satisfied with the progress we have made. Is there anyone in this room thoroughly satisfied with the progress we have made so far as the wages of the people of this country are concerned? Is anyone satisfied with the share of the wealth produced? I hold that labour applied to raw material is the most important factor in producing wealth. Is anyone satisfied while the power for producing wealth is increasing by leaps and bounds, is the living conditions of the people improving in anything like proportion to the power of producing wealth? No; the conditions of the people are not improving in accordance with the production of wealth, and the wealth must be going elsewhere; it must be going into the pockets of the capitalist classes. It is creating surplus wealth which will be used for the further enslavement of

labour. There is a war between the producers and the non-producers, and the producer cannot secure benefits in the shape of higher wages, shorter hours, better housing conditions, or anything of that kind without having to secure it at the expense of other people. There is a war by the advanced labour movement to-day, a war against poverty, and there is a war which is moving forward in the direction of eliminating those who lived on the land, and capital without toiling for their living. This is going on, and we shall have to accept the propaganda of that movement. There is a class war being waged in all the civilized countries in the world, even in down trodden Russia there is the same movement going on, and therefore we want this Federation to keep up its strength. We have a great deal of work yet to do, we require to protect our members, and it is necessary for the local unions to be well organised, and there must be no disruption amongst ourselves. I regret to see in the newspapers, (and anything that appears in the public press I suppose we are entitled to refer to). I regret to see from the paper a report of a disruption in this country of South Wales, in which we are holding this Conference. I believe any movement of this kind, which will break up local organisations and divide them into different sections, is not healthy for the general Trades Union movement. I regret very much we have anything of that kind, but that is a matter entirely for our South Wales comrades. I only speak of it, because we must realise it is a most dangerous thing, and does not tend in the direction of the solidarity of the movement. I think all will agree that this movement of ours is worth working for, this movement has done a great deal on behalf of our class. Let us remember what obtained a hundred years ago. Some of the miners were bought and sold with the mines. A hundred years is a very short period in the history of progress either in a nation or a movement, and looking back at what has been accomplished we can look forward with hope. One hundred years ago the miners were practically looked upon as savages, and now look at the proud position that we hold to-day with our greater freedom, our franchise, and educational facilities. I ask you to stick tenaciously together and work for the class whose interest we have so much at heart. I appeal to you to go forward, upwards and onward. We shall have differences, but let us agree to differ, whether we differ on details or principle. Let us try to conduct our business this week so that we shall have done good work for the people whom we represent. I hope that we shall do our business in such a way that every person here will go away strengthened, and I hope to look forward to the time when the miners generally will be in a vastly improved position than what they are at the present time.