
PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

The CHAIRMAN: I find again on the agenda an item, No. 3—President's Address. I have endeavoured unsuccessfully to get the Secretary to leave that item off this year's agenda but he insists that that part of the business should be carried out. It is becoming a very usual thing now in many of the great Societies, Labour Party, Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress,

that the President should prepare and write out their addresses, and I think in some cases submit them to their Committees for approval or otherwise. Our Federation has not taken up this position and anything which I may say in the very brief address that I will deliver to-day, it may be taken largely, I think, as my own views and my own opinions. I take it that the Miners' Federation has no desire that its President should shape his views to suit either the Executive, the Conference, or the miners themselves, and if he holds views on any great national question or mining question, it ought to be his duty to endeavour as far as possible to impress those views on all the members with a view to having them accepted if worthy of acceptance. I seldom, if ever, prepare any address for an occasion of this kind, and at this time because of the nature of the Executive work and my own work during the past fortnight, there has not been an opportunity of thinking of very much in the way of preparation.

WELCOME TO DELEGATES AND MEMBERSHIP.

I want, on behalf of the Executive, to welcome the delegates here to this 29th Conference of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. In spite of the crisis through which the nation and its workers is passing at the present time, we are glad to be able to report the continued progress in the membership of our great Federation. A trial such as the nation is going through at the present time, such as the people of the nation necessarily are going through also, as it has been for Governments, for organisations, and for men, we ought, I think, to be glad to be able to report that our Federation has increased its membership by between 30,000 and 40,000 since we met in Glasgow twelve months ago. I have a feeling myself, and it is shared solidly by my Executive, that there ought to be no difficulty during the next three months of increasing the membership at the centre of the Miners' Federation by 70,000 or 100,000 more members. We believe that districts, if they have them, we think we ought to have them in our Central Federation. I want to throw that out as a hint. Mr. Ashton has the power to go to any district and examine the books and request Branches to pay up to the full membership. We believe it is sometimes wise to keep a few, as there may be a floating membership; but I do not think there is any reason why we should not have the full membership connected with this Federation.

WAGES.

This year has brought us face to face with a claim on two occasions for an increase in miners' wages. The claim in September last—last year, ten months ago—I must say was made very reluctantly. It was forced upon us by circumstances, by the fact that the cost of living had gone up, gone up to a point which made it impossible for our miners and their families to continue to live unless a substantial increase in wages took place. In view of the fact that the mines were

controlled, that the Government had taken up the working of the mines to all intents and purposes in their hands, we thought that any claim of that kind should be a national claim made on behalf of the whole of the mining community to the common centre, the Coal Controller, and through him the Government. We succeeded ultimately in securing an increase in wages. We found since September last, as the months went on, that the cost of living had not been to any great extent arrested, and the belief expressed to us on behalf of the Government in September last that we had reached in all probability the extent the cost of living would reach had not fructified, and a few weeks ago we were again face to face with the necessity of asking for a further increase in wages. That claim was put forward by almost every Branch of the Miners' Federation, it was not by any means confined to one or two districts, but was fairly universal, although the amount to be claimed was not the same by any means from all districts. Your Executive fully considered the matter, and they decided to call a Special Conference, and before that Conference they put their own views. They felt that you ought to fix your claim for an increase in wages at the lowest possible point in keeping with the needs of the people in view of the increased cost in many food commodities, in clothing, and other things, they advised the Conference to keep their claim down to the lowest possible limit, and to let the Coal Controller, and, through him, the Government, know that if that demand were put forward there was not to be any bargaining with that demand, but that it would have to be met. The Conference took that advice from the Executive and a claim was put forward. It is not necessary I should go into the whole of the negotiations further than to say the Government was exceedingly anxious that our claim for the full amount should not be pressed. There was nothing for us except to press for the full amount, believing that our people and our homes required it, and that we had no room to negotiate or bargain.

CHARGES OF USING POWER OF ORGANISATION.

It has been hinted that the miners are taking advantage, and have taken advantage of the great power of their organisation and the nation's needs at the present time to enforce upon the nation and upon the Government unjust claims. We have had this complaint indeed from a very high authority; personally I repudiate any such claim. I have said that it is absolutely untrue that the Miners' Federation of Great Britain is taking advantage of the nation's needs and their own power to enforce unjust claims against the nation or against the Government. It ought to be remembered that your claim was put forward because of the increased cost of existence in this country, to meet as far as possible the increase in the price of food commodities and other commodities. The Government have been told that your claim was not put forward after taking into consideration the value or importance of the miners at all to the nation, that if we had calculated of the use-value of the miner and

the right of the miners' wives and children to live as well as any other class of the community, it would not have been 1s. 6d. a day our organisation would have been asking for at all; we do not base our claim upon the dangerous and laborious nature of a miner's employment and the importance of their employment to the nation. We are not using our organisation to fix a competitive or use-value of miners at all; were we using our power in that direction it might be justly said against us we were taking advantage of the nation's necessity in order to force the real economic value of the miners in the shape of higher wages, and then some of us are of the opinion if the miners claimed £2 or £2 10s. a day to enable their families to live under circumstances they were entitled to live, they would not, from the point of view of importance and value to the nation, be claiming too much. We are not going to use the power of this great organisation in the time of the nation's trial and place the responsibility upon the nation for returning to the mining community their real value. I say it comes very bad indeed from people who are in receipt of incomes of anything from £1,000 to £10,000 per year, for doing in many cases nothing at all, or very useless work so far as the nation is concerned, to accuse men of taking advantage of their power and the nation's necessity.

POLITICAL.

During the year we have had a further problem on the Labour political side of the Labour movement of this country. We have seen further Conferences held in London, and further progress made with regard to the widening of the Constitution of the Labour Party. We have had reports that under the New Franchise Law, at the first General Election, there is a probability of a large number of additional Labour candidates running, it might be 350 or 400 candidates running in favour of labour. I am glad to see a further extension of the constitution of the Labour Party. Personally, I am anxious to take advantage of the ability and brains of every good man and woman in this country, whether they are working at the bench or in the mine, or whether they are working at any work at all, providing they genuinely sympathise with us in our claims and are willing to act along the lines with us in securing those claims. There is an effort being made at the present time to minimise the Labour Party because of its latest method to extend its ranks and take in someone who may not be a direct hand worker. Personally I was, and am, extremely anxious to welcome men and women of the educated classes, if they come into our movement honestly and genuinely to help us forward. The Labour Party, whatever its numbers, will only be useful to the labour movement by being absolutely independent of the other political parties (the capitalist parties) in this country. Mere numbers in the House of Commons might mean nothing so far as labour is concerned; it might, indeed, tend to the destruction of the Labour Party itself. The Labour Party will only be strong if it is made up of strong

men and independent of the other political parties (the capitalistic parties), and independent of capital. We need not care so much for numbers if we get that class of people in the House of Commons. Personally, I feel there is no need to doubt the ability of the workers of this country to govern this country if they get the opportunity to do so. It is their duty, in my opinion, to take up the position that the time has come when the Labour Party—the labour movement—ought to be sufficiently strong to return a majority of members to the House of Commons to take its right place in the government of the country.

RECONSTRUCTION.

There is a good deal of talk at the present time about reconstruction after the war. It will be difficult to know what kind of reconstruction will be possible after the war until we have some idea of how long the war is going to last. The war may last sufficiently long to make any kind of reconstruction impossible for many, many years to come; but if the war is going to end within a reasonable period, then it will be still possible to reconstruct. We have what are called the best brains and best men in this country engaged at the present time in considering the question of reconstruction. There is a class called captains of industry—amongst capitalists, great managers and scientific managers, there were men called captains of industry—these men, many of the greatest professors of our colleges, have been for months considering the question of reconstruction. While I am particularly anxious on the question of reconstruction after the war, I am particularly anxious to know on what lines reconstruction is going on. Is it to be the old order or the new? If it is to be the old order, if we are going to reconstruct in the direction of using the land of this country, the value of the productive power of the finest machinery in the workshops, coupled with the great skill of the workers, if reconstruction is for the largest possible output merely to hand it over to the capitalist classes in the shape of dividends, I am not going in for that kind of reconstruction and will not lend myself to it. If we have learned the lesson of the war, the first lesson ought to be that the land of this country should belong to the whole of the country and not to a few people and that we ought to have the right to use the land of this country up to its fullest productive power without the blackmailing of any landlord class of the country at all. We ought to have the machinery of the country used in the production of commodities. I am anxious that our people should join in a reconstruction which will produce to the fullest capacity from the best machinery, make use of the best brains and skill in the production and use of commodities necessary for the home. Commodities will be provided for the people and will not be done in such a way as to cause tens of thousands of men and women to be amongst the ranks of the unemployed because there are too many commodities, and their children starving, but in such a way that there is plenty for all. We are capable of reproducing in this country

of ours, commodities sufficient for the use of the homes of our people and instead of producing merely for the sake of dividends and in such quantities to eventually cause our men and women to walk the streets unemployed. Our idea of reconstruction is, it ought to be in the direction where over-production would be impossible, by a reduction of hours down to the lowest possible point, the lowest possible point we can get it. Personally I do not think that a great movement such as our own Miners' Federation of Great Britain would justify its existence if it merely set up bargaining now and again for a 10 per cent. increase or against a 5 per cent. or 10 per cent. decrease, if it merely existed for the purpose of securing some little bit of petty useful legislation, if it merely thought of the hours and conditions of the miners, if it merely stood for the mining community itself, I do not think its aims would be as noble as they ought to be; these, of course, are very important things to us, but my own personal position would be that I would not care to spend the remaining years of my life in this movement if I thought our movement stood for that alone. I feel that while our movement stands first and foremost for our men, wives, and children having reasonable and fair conditions, we also stand for the whole working class community, for the upraising of the human race in this country and in all other countries. If that be so, then this great movement of ours should have no difficulty at all as to what side it is going to endeavour to take in the work of reconstruction in this country.

CONTROL.

The coal mines of this country are now under Government control. Government control is not sufficient. The mining community should make sure not only that the mines should continue to be controlled, but under Government ownership, for the production of coal for the use of the whole community.

INCREASE IN WAGES AND PRICES.

I should like to say a word or two here in connection with your increase in wages. When we secured the first increase in wages in September last the Government put an increase of 2s. 6d. per ton on all coal in this country with the exception of the coal exported to our Allies, Italy and France, and, of course, the increase was not put on the miners' coal. We were informed, to our astonishment, may I say, we were informed it took the whole of the 2s. 6d. increase to give the increase of 1s. 6d. and 9d. per day on the miners' wages; we had not taken into consideration to a sufficient extent the enormous increase in the cost of materials used at the mine, and we were told it would take the whole of the 2s. 6d. Prior to our securing the present advance 2s. 6d. went on the price of coal, making 5s. increase on coal exported. That must have been a second 2s. 6d. to make up for the one they did not put on previously. We anticipated that that advance was put on the price of coal to

meet our claim, and when it was agreed we were to have our second advance of 1s. 6d. per day, it was intimated that the price of coal would be increased by 1s. 6d. per ton. Naturally, persons outside the mining community who will have to pay this increase turn their attention to the miners and say, "It is all because of the enormous advance in wages which the miners have received." The miners will require to make serious inquiry into why it is that it requires first one 2s. 6d. and then another 2s. 6d., and then 1s. 6d. added to the price of coal to enable the miners to get an increase of 1s. 6d. a day and then another 1s. 6d. a day. It is a matter outside the function of the Executive, being a question largely for the general public; but if we are to be blamed by asking for and forcing an increase in wages, for having forced up the price of coal, it will be our function to find out where these increases are going to, because it does not require anything like these increases to give the miners the two advances which they have received. I think, perhaps, it is in another direction in which the solution may be found: that is, in the increased value of the shares of many of the mining companies since the war began, proving that, so far as the mine owners are concerned, they seem to be making a good deal out of the control of mines. That will be for your Executive to consider, because I know this gives rise to a very considerable amount of talk amongst our own miners in the mining districts themselves, and there is just a danger that, in spite of the fact that we have received recently increases in wages, if the price is going up far beyond what would justify our increase in wages, there may be a further demand from the miners for a further increase in wages.

SNIPING.

I would like to say a word or two about another matter. At the London Conference of the Labour Party, and through the Press since that time, there has been a good deal of talk about what is called sniping. Sniping, I take it, is shooting at persons from behind a shelter. I may say that, personally, I have been subjected recently to a very considerable amount of sniping myself. The Miners' Federation held a Conference in London on the day prior to the Labour Party Conference being held, in order that we might have an opportunity of discussing the agenda of the Labour Party Conference itself. One resolution on the agenda was a recommendation from the Executive that the party truce should come to an end, and I was amazed to find, in that Conference, that the miners' delegates were absolutely unanimous in supporting the resolution that the party truce should end. I was surprised to find that, as a matter of fact we had no division, absolutely none. After the Labour Party Conference, Mr. Smith and myself required to wait over in connection with the wages question in London, and we found in one of those delightfully truthful London papers a paragraph to the effect, that a friend of the writer who was a close and personal friend of one of the

Miners' Agents or delegates, had told the writer that a delegate had told him that Mr. Smillie had sold the miners in connection with the truce. Now I consider that is a case of sniping of the most despicable character. That person says in a roundabout way, in a way which makes it quite impossible to reply to him, that a miners' leader or delegate informed him so and so, and informed him that Smillie, President of this Organisation had sold the miners at the Labour Party Conference. Well now, you cannot reply to stuff of that kind. I personally would place our miners' delegates higher, and my colleagues also, higher than to think any delegate would say such a thing of the President of this Federation. It is nothing new to me. I have been sniped at for over thirty years. In the early days of the mining movement the vast majority of the men did not hold such advanced views as I did. I am glad I have held advanced views, and those who have held advanced views have been continually sniped at right away down. Personally I do not object to employers sniping and to fight as hard as they care to, but I should strongly object to our own people in our own movement putting up behind the hedge. If there is anything in my own action during the past four years, if there is anything in the fact of my not agreeing in my war views with the majority of the miners, if there is anything in that, it is not for sniping, it is for open discussion face to face, when we should get an opportunity of seeing eye to eye with each other. Now I am looked upon for the time being as head of this organisation and I have always turned any little brains I possessed in thinking out these problems, and believe that this war, like other wars, is due to private ownership. I may be quite wrong, but I only should be held responsible for the brains I have been provided with in trying to think out matters of this kind. I do think that in the labour movement, whatever views are held on the war, we should be entitled to disagree, and I hope, whilst we may not agree on the war, it is our duty to keep united as far as we possibly can on the great labour cause, because whenever the war ends we ought to be fighting side by side on the great questions of industrialism and social reconstruction. I only want to say this, that this Federation or any other organisation does not want a mere puppet at the head of that organisation; they want a Chairman who has the courage to pronounce his views and ideals.

WAR AND OUTPUT OF COAL.

Since we last met in Glasgow the war has carried on, and in that twelve months hundreds and thousands of lives have been sacrificed, and, so far as I can see at the present time, the rulers of the countries (the diplomats and politicians of the countries of Europe) could not evidently do anything to bring a successful issue to this war. I am one, rightly or wrongly, who believes solemnly and earnestly that this might have been settled on two or three occasions during the past two years, and settled on lines honourable and

satisfactory to all people. It must end some time. I have no desire to say anything to-day that will embitter feeling one way or another. I know that all our sympathies go out to those who are bearing the brunt of this great war in the trenches and suffering untold privations at the front. Our sympathies are in the homes, with the mothers and the wives of those brave comrades of ours, and for these and other reasons I feel sure that not one of us desire this war to continue a single moment longer than there can be a fair and satisfactory solution. I want to ask you, and this may not be the duty of a labour leader in connection with a matter which may not be orthodox. I hold strong views on the war, but we are in this war, and our lads are defending inch by inch their positions. During this year nearly 100,000 additional men—many of them the strongest and best—have been taken away from the mines to join the Army. That has lessened the power of the mining movement to produce coal. The need for coal is greater to-day—far greater—than it was twelve months ago. The Germans in their advance have taken a large number of French mines which were held practically for months and months on the firing line, with shells raining about the collieries and coke ovens. They were held and worked by these Frenchmen out there. They have been lost, and the French people will require to continue to produce as much munitions as possible so long as the war continues, and we will require to supply a large additional amount of coal. In connection with the last increase of wages, the Coal Controller asked your Executive to do everything in their power to use their influence with the men who are still in the mines to keep up or increase if possible the output. I pledged my word, so far as I was concerned, I would do everything in my power to secure that that should be done, that our Executive, so far as they were able to do so, would do so. I am not in favour, and have not been in favour, of ending this war merely by laying down tools and allowing the Germans to over run us, no more than I would be in favour, or the Germans would be in favour, of the German workers declaring a general strike and allowing us to over run them. I believe the war could have been ended by common intelligence by a round table talk. We believe that it is the duty of the men to produce as much coal in the hours worked as possible in order that the nation may not be left without coal for the Army, for munition workers, and especially for the homes of our people. Drastic rationing is going to take place. Personally, I feel sure it will hit the poorest of our people worst of all. I feel sure it will not hit the wealthy classes nearly so bad as it will hit the poorer classes, and one thing the mining movement ought to make sure of is, if rationing is carried out as strictly as is proposed, that the coal which is being produced, so far as home consumption is concerned, should be as fairly and equally distributed to the poorest of the people as it is to the wealthy people who are able to purchase. Your Executive make this appeal to you to do everything in your power to secure the highest possible output of coal. I know it may be unpopular in some directions. I myself want to say, in view of the whole circumstances, I think

there can be no justification for any man who is strong enough to be at his work every day laying idle two or three days a week. He is not acting in the interests of his own family in doing so, and it ought to be remembered that a Conference instructed the Miners' Executive to go and see the Controller and tell him they desired a substantial increase in wages to meet the increased cost of living; and if we have, as I regret to say we have, many thousands of miners unnecessarily losing time, refusing to go to the pits on days when their health is all right, it does not go to prove our contention that we require an increase to meet the increased cost of living. It is the duty of a man—it is a duty to his family as well as to his country—to attend as regularly as he possibly can. It is a matter of duty to our own class, who are bearing the heat and burden of the day at the front. I appeal to the Conference to think this matter over this week, and, if possible, back up your Executive in the pledge they have given to the Controller that, so far as we are concerned, we will do everything in our power to improve and increase the output of coal so far as possible.