

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS.

The CHAIRMAN: I see the next on the agenda is the President's address. I want to say that, although I have been acting President for some time, this is the first time I have attempted to give an address, particularly a written out address, because when I have had anything to say I have just said it in my own language, and I have tried to get this address in my own language, so that nobody will misunderstand it.

POSTPONEMENT OF CONFERENCE.

You will all be acquainted with the reasons why the Annual Conference, which was planned to be held in this town in the first week in July, had to be postponed for a period until to-day. As our stoppage continued up to the first week in July it was physically impossible to hold the Conference at the appointed time. We were all so fully engaged with the work in hand

that we felt at one time that there could be no Conference at all this year, but upon reflection, and in view of the fact that the stoppage finally came to an end, it was felt that the Annual Conference ought to be held, if only for the purpose of reviewing the year's work and bring our minds to bear on future problems, even though the resolutions that are upon the agenda appear to be lacking the vital interest that they would have had had there been no stoppage.

COAL INDUSTRY ACT.

July, 1920, saw us engaged in the work of contesting the Coal Industry Bill, refusing to take part in the Committee stage of the Bill, declining to operate it when it became law because we saw that it contained the principle of district regulation of wages and the departure from the method of unification established under control and a danger to our own ideas as to the future development of the industry. Since then we have completed the cycle. August, 1921, sees us with the unanimous vote from the districts in favour of working the Coal Industry Act, having failed in our purpose to eliminate the district regulation of wages. We are now parties to an agreement which definitely re-establishes district arrangements, and we thus find ourselves in practically the position contemplated by the Coal Industry Bill. This circle represents the beginning and end of a period unparalleled in the history of our industry and of our Trade Union.

LOSSES TO THE FEDERATION.

During this critical year, and at a critical moment, our late President (Mr. Robert Smillie) went into retirement. Death has claimed several of our colleagues and fellow officials. John Wadsworth, of Yorkshire, Alfred Onions and James Winstone, of South Wales, and G. B. Hobbs, of Cleveland. The movement is poorer for their departure. It is for us as the present and younger generation to resolve that in the short span of life allotted to us we will dedicate ourselves to the cause which we love with the same zeal and enthusiasm, honour and integrity, as those whom death has taken during these last twelve months. Judged from the incidents of the year it finds no equal in past history.

INFLUENCE OF WAR.

The war had left a strong influence upon the minds of owners and workmen in the mining industry. It was during last year that influence became manifest. Owing to the economic position of coal during the war a sense of power and importance was developed in the minds of the workmen which was not altogether healthy. In fact, it gave the workmen an unreal sense of importance. It gave many of our people an exaggerated opinion of their power. The ease and directness with which we had secured our various demands tended to make us believe that that state of things would last long after the factors which caused it had disappeared. One great feature, however, which came to us as a heritage of the war was a new sense of unity and oneness as distinct upon the national achievements we had secured as distinct from the district effort, both as regards hours and wages.

STRIKES, ETC.—AGREEMENTS.

The first great test came to us in October, 1920, when we were asking for a further advance in wages in consequence of the then state of prosperity in the trade. That a claim for an advance in wages was justified is without doubt, but the forces that were against us directly and definitely accepted our challenge. We fought for two and a half weeks, and we did not win.

We had to accept a compromise. The lesson of the strike which resulted in the datum line agreement was taken to heart by many of us. The economic power given to the industry by war was not so strong in peace, particularly in view of the gradual restoration of the world's production of coal combined with the noticeable falling off in demand. The transitory character of that agreement was seen in January of this year when the miners had nothing left to show for their two and a half weeks' strike which they had experienced. A desire at once grew up to effect an agreement containing much more staple elements than those contained in previous agreements. Wages in future had to be governed by some definite and well understood principles which would make the regulation of wages practically automatic for a considerable time to come, and it was to this problem your Executive Committee addressed itself very early in the year, and in conformity with the clause in the Datum Line Agreement proceeded to work out with the owners a plan for the establishment of a just agreement which would make for the equitable distribution of wages and profits out of the proceeds of the industry.

DECONTROL.

Whilst engaged in this work the Government embarked upon a programme the like of which has never been known before, and the consequences have been the most disastrous in the history of the industry. During the period they were occupied with the peaceful work of drawing up the new agreement for the regulation of wages and profits, the Government decided to decontrol the industry, a decision which took both parties by surprise and virtually made it impossible for the work to proceed. For this act, if for no other, this Government should cease to hold office as the representative Government of the people. The Government and the nation had had a great pull out of the industry during the war and up to the end of 1920. It had had its fat years. It however refused to accept responsibility during the lean years. Immediately the market broke and the price of coal began to fall the Government shed its liability, the consequences of which have practically destroyed our economic stability. It is possible we could have worked out a complete agreement with the owners without a stoppage of work in August, although the subsequent attitude of the owners gives us no grounds for this hope provided we continued to insist upon the letter of our demand for the national pool and profits. The owners for political reasons sided with the Government although even they learned that for economic reasons they would have been wiser to have supported the men in their claim for a continuance of control until the 31st August. It is now known that the Government attacked us when we were at our weakest point. Had they believed it possible that the miners would have stood out for 13 weeks without funds, with very little outside assistance, they might have modified their policy, but, all circumstances considered, they chose a moment most opportune for what they considered to be the defeat of our powerful organisation.

QUESTION OF TACTICS.—WAGES.

It was at this moment that the members of the Miners' Federation should have paused, given grave consideration to all the forces against them, weighed up the pros and cons of the situation against them and acted with discrimination and judgment. At this early stage the leaders of the Federation were not wanting in vision and outlook. I say it with all due modesty, that if we had properly learnt the lesson of the strike of October, 1920, we should have adopted entirely different tactics from those

adopted by us prior to the 31st March. Those of us who had learnt the lesson advised the districts to concentrate on the point upon which we had secured and were continuing to secure public sympathy namely. wages. The wage cuts proposed by the employers were outrageous. The public knew it and resented it. Our own people understood it. The Trade Union movement understood it. Some of us asked districts to allow us freedom as an Executive to negotiate a wage settlement, leaving the distinctly political question of the pool over for future consideration and action. A district vote was taken upon this issue which resulted in such advice being set aside.

GREAT LOCK-OUT.

That was a wrong decision; subsequent events have only too clearly proven. It was in this atmosphere, then, that the great lock-out began on the 31st March. In spite of the fact that the advice of certain leaders had been turned down, both in the districts and at the National Conference, no indication of division showed itself to the outside world; to the Government we were a compact, united body of people struggling against adversity and for the ideals we held as to the future of the industry.

WITHDRAWING SAFETY MEN.

Immediately preceding the stoppage another error was made, from my point of view. That was the error of withdrawing all the safety men at the collieries, the consequences of which we see around about us to-day in those districts and collieries where employment is scarce owing to the physical breakdown of many of the mines. This policy evoked a storm of opposition against us, the public sympathy we had gained on the one hand in respect of our wage position being lost in consequence of this action. This action caused resentment among our colleagues in the Triple Alliance, and created difficulties for them which could not be readily overcome, and the early part of our discussion with them was taken up entirely with this question, and in consequence of their pressure, and their pressure alone, we modified our attitude to a considerable degree in regard to safety men, although by this time a great deal of damage had been done to our cause.

TRIPLE ALLIANCE.

This brings me to the memorable 16th April, when the events occurred which led up to the decision of the Triple Alliance. The test put upon this organisation was more than it could bear, a test which in the very nature of things it could not bear, nor will bear, until its constituent bodies are fighting for some common principle which affects all alike at the same time; although they had already decided to strike with us on the question of the national pool, they afterwards weakened when they knew that we were asking them to strike with us for something they had not themselves obtained, namely, the national pool. This can never be the case as long as the constituent bodies have their separate agreements, their separate obligations. Capital will always be shrewd enough to see that an organisation such as this will never have a common grievance at the same time, whether it be the question of hours or wages. The incidents which led up to their decision have all been enumerated at our Conference held on April 22nd in London, and need not be gone over here, except to say that the Miners' Federation never gave the Triple Alliance the opportunity of fighting with it on the one question that the three parties had most in common, namely, wages. Our claim for their support was based on a national pool, with wages as a secondary consideration. These organisations had no claims

for a national pool, but they understood wages and our wage difficulties. We did not seek their support on the simple and elementary things, but urged their compliance with us on a much more involved and political claim, namely, that of the pool. Whatever else may be said about the individual action of this or that man, this much is certain, the miners themselves never provided the opportunity for united action upon something that all understood.

LOYALTY.

The loyalty of the officials of the Federation has been called into question in consequence of this episode. The truth is that the officials of the Federation were too loyal, too loyal to a so-called majority rule, too loyal to their colleagues, swallowing their convictions and better judgment, because they were out-voted by the usually narrow majority vote. If they have one regret, it is because they were too loyal, believing as they do that their loyalty was purchased at too big a price—the price of the poverty and starvation of their members, and the misery of millions of their fellow countrymen.

TERMINATION OF STOPPAGE.

The conduct of subsequent events, the manner of terminating the stoppage, have been called into question. Those who had least responsibility were loudest in their attacks. Certain miners' Members of Parliament whose futility in the House of Commons was manifest day after day, whose words in that assembly were of non-effect, were the first to pronounce judgment upon those who carried greater responsibilities in the organisation itself. Their whole attitude seems to be summed up in the words: "How much better I could have done had I been in their place." We might have been accused of being undemocratic, even of being autocratic, for terminating the stoppage in the way we terminated it, but it is infinitely preferable to do an undemocratic thing in the interests of your people than to allow empty, high-sounding formulas to intensify the horror and misery of the people's life.

DISLOYAL TO CONFERENCE FINDINGS.

There were those among us who were disloyal to the Conference findings. Our critics took advantage of our loyalty. When our tongues were tied out of respect to the Conference decision they wagged theirs in no uncertain manner. Within closed doors, in circulars, in conference, in public, they violated the Conference decision (which pledged us all to no recommendation). They urged the men to reject the terms, knowing full well that the majority would be tongue-tied out of loyalty. Those who used the most inflamed language in their denunciation of the terms were the ones who had long since given up the task of trying to stop the production of outcrop coal in their districts. For cant and humbug there has never been anything equal. We found afterwards that many of the terms had been distorted. I want to say here and now that if I had felt free to advise our district before the last ballot vote the Yorkshire decision would have been entirely different. We have nothing to retract, nothing to withdraw. If we have a regret it is that we did not take the step earlier. We are convinced that we freed ourselves from hypocritical formulæ just in the nick of time.

RESUMPTION OF WORK AND AGREEMENT.

Now we are back at work except for those men who cannot secure work either through physical reasons at the pits where they originally worked or through the desire of the owners to reduce personnel in their employment for what is described as "more efficient and economic working." We

have entered upon an agreement, the fundamental principles of which are sound. There may be room for improvement in its details. We shall be better able to judge after a year's work than now as to its possibilities and benefits. Our only desire is to see the men engaged in a thoroughly efficient industry. We want them to have the maximum conditions possible as regards earnings and conditions of employment. If there are conditions of employment still open for us but not possible within the limits of private capitalism, whatever scheme is devised then we must seek to obtain them by the simple constitutional and evolutionary means open to us, namely, political action; but as long as we are subject to the institution known as private enterprise we must try to make the most of it for our members as long as it lasts. We must not presume either that the way to bring it to an end is to consciously and wittingly reduce the industry to chaos, for by this means, if a change ever comes in the system of ownership, we shall inherit a system which cannot be rectified by the one which substitutes it.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE.

In conclusion, I must express on behalf of the Executive our deep gratitude for the financial assistance that was secured for us during our stoppage through the medium of the Parliamentary Committee and the Labour Party, the "Daily Herald," the host of individual subscribers, Trade Unions, Labour Parties, organisations, both national and international, workers at home and workers abroad during our struggle. It is true the amount of money when worked out over our individual membership did not realise a great deal. The amount up to Saturday last received from all sources was £184,495, of which £180,841 have been distributed to districts. This sum, when divided over our total membership, amounted to 4s. per member, not per week, but 4s. for the whole of the 13 weeks. The solidarity that it displayed, however, and the eagerness to help showed an excellent spirit of brotherliness among the common people. We are grateful, and shall always remain grateful, and we trust that the fortitude with which our people faced this protracted stoppage will not be without its effect upon the rest of the organised workers of this country and other countries.

RESULTS OF STOPPAGE.

The lot of our people has been hard. It remains hard. The life savings of many are gone. A mountain of debt stares them in the face. Debt which will take many weary months to wipe off. But our people have taken this experience to heart. They will seek only to accomplish the things within the practical possibility. They will pay but little heed to those whose principal gifts are words, but will respect the judgment of those who have made real contributions to their material well-being in the days that have gone.

UNEMPLOYMENT.

It is true that a number of our members have been deprived of the benefit of the Unemployment Insurance Act where their unemployment is due to physical reasons at the colliery caused by the stoppage. But we have taken the only steps open to us to get this remedied by urging the Labour Party to secure amendments of the existing law. Here is scope indeed for the eloquence and criticism of our miners' Members of Parliament.

FUTURE.

We must now in the interval between to-day and the end of this agreement work quietly and seriously in attempting to rebuild our forces. In the

meanwhile our ordinary progressive work must go forward. In our sphere of work connected with the improvement of the safety of mines, the prevention of accidents (fatal and non-fatal), improvement of industrial legislation such as the Workmen's Compensation Act, our social betterment schemes, in all those matters intimately affecting our daily life we must take the greatest possible interest, achieving the things nearest our hand, not grasping at shadows, or crying for the moon of political impossibilities. If we do this with steadfastness and courage and comradeship, we shall once again attain a position of power and influence which would compel justice and right dealing from those who hold in their hands the reins of authority.