

The CHAIRMAN: The next on the agenda is the President's Address.

The year through which we have just passed is without doubt one of the most critical in the history of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. There are those amongst us who can remember the days when wages were low, when trade was bad, when the cost of living was high; but any difference between the present moment and then is only one of degree. The number of men employed in the industry in 1888, for example, was 518,797, whilst the number employed at present amounts to 1,094,187. The fact that the conditions are so widely spread as to become almost universal distinguishes the history of last year from the history of previous bad periods. It was not to be expected that the working classes could completely escape the evil consequences of the war. The war would have been different from any previous war if the workmen had not suffered in their social life. But I am convinced that the evils have been aggravated and extended by the failure of the Government to take advice from those who knew best and by pursuing a policy of immediate political interest and gain, rather than a policy which embraced the immediate and future interests of the community. The Government were warned by the Miners' Federation as to what would be bound to happen in the mining industry if they continued to ignore the advice of those of us who have lived through mining crises before. It is on record in the various reports of the Conferences held with the Government in 1919, 1920, and 1921, that the representatives of the Federation prophesied the evils that would

overtake the trade unless the Government took timely action to stave them off. We all know what action was taken. We have lived to know the terrible consequences that have followed from their action. Whilst it may have taken the Cabinet one day to decide to prematurely deccontrol the mining industry, it will take years to wipe out the consequences of that decision. Since the temporary period came to an end in October, 1921, wages in the industry have fallen consistently, until there is only one district in the Federation with wages above the minimum. Whilst the number of days worked appeared to be increasing in the months of April and May, they are now decreasing, although it is no new feature in mining to find that the number of days worked are less in summer than in winter or in spring. Whilst the downward tendency of employment may be checked during the month of August, it will not be until September and October before employment again shows an increase. I am not a pessimist; I am certain we shall come out of the present position within the next year; but it will not be because of any assistance received from the Government, because the world trade may improve, one might say, in spite of the Government. I am certain, however, that if the coalowners conducted the business of the industry in a better and more united way the period of difficulty would be considerably shortened. The owners as a whole have experienced hardships during the last year, but the hardship has not fallen with anything like the severity upon the individual coalowner and his family that it has fallen upon the workman and his family. This much, however, must be recognised, that as long as we have private enterprise in coalmining the prosperity of the owners is linked up with the prosperity of the workmen, and *vice versa*.

HOURS OF LABOUR.

In spite of the dark days through which we have passed, it must not be thought that there have been no bright spots. I am glad to think that the miners have retained one great boon and blessing—the seven hours day. This undoubtedly is the biggest accomplishment of the Federation so far in its history. Some owners have made passing references to the need for abolishing it; but in my judgment this by no means represents a considered view of the owners as a whole. For it is now known that, providing we had the trade, we could, with proper internal organisation and a more extensive use of scientific methods, not only maintain the output per man employed in pre-war days which we are doing, but we could increase the output beyond the aggregate output produced in 1913, providing we had the same number of men employed and worked the same number of shifts per week. Therefore, come what may, we must determine that there shall be no tampering with this reform, which is vital to the physical well-being of those who toil in the bowels of the earth.

LOYALTY OF MEMBERS.

Then, again, we have cause to congratulate ourselves upon the fact that, for the most part, our men have continued to show a sturdy belief in their trade union organisation. Bad trade and complete unemployment have tended to decrease the membership of the Federation in certain districts, but our figures will show that we have not been reduced by 100,000, although there has been an average number of miners drawing unemployment pay during the last year of over 100,000, in addition to the large number wrongfully disqualified from benefits. As trade improves and some of these men are re-employed the membership of the Federation will soon become what it was in 1917 and 1918. The spirit of the men on the whole has been wonderful, and as soon as the volume of employment increases the old strength of the Miners' Federation will be restored.

WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION.

During the year, in conjunction with the General Council, Trades Union Congress, and the Parliamentary Labour Party, we have been urging the Government to introduce new legislation in respect of the Workmen's Compensation Act. Whilst it is true that the Cabinet decided that they would not introduce legislation to embody the recommendations of the Holman-Gregory Report, and by their refusal have put off for an indefinite period one of the greatest reforms for the advantage and benefit of the injured workmen and the dependants of those unfortunate ones who lost their lives while following their occupation, the War Addition Acts have at least been retained upon the Statute Book. At the present moment a Committee of Employers and Workmen are engaged, in conjunction with the Home Office, in an attempt to secure some amendment to the existing law, which will come into operation when the War Additions Act comes to an end. We must not rest satisfied, however, until the recommendations of the Holman-Gregory Report become the law of the land.

WAGE AGREEMENT.

I do not propose to anticipate any discussion of the Conference upon the question of the new Wage Agreement, but I think it is only fitting that I should say that during the year one of the important decisions of the Independent Chairman has been modified to a considerable extent by the National Board itself. The decision to supply information to the workmen as to "cost of production" has been of the greatest possible advantage to the workmen in assisting them to understand more fully the finances of the industry. Whilst it is true that the Federation desires to have still greater information than that which is now given, it is a source of some pleasure to think that the owners themselves acceded to our request for further information without our having to go before the Independent Chairman, who had already given a decision against the workmen. The statement that will be circulated to the Conference will show to what extent we are in possession of the inner working of the industry. There is nothing more calculated to destroy confidence and to create suspicion than for the workmen to be denied the very fullest information, especially when their wages depend upon the financial results of the industry. I am convinced that if the owners took the workmen still more into their confidence a much better spirit would prevail throughout the districts. Bad though the circumstances of the trade have been, this much cannot be gainsaid, that had it not been for the operation of the Minimum Clause in the Agreement, which provides for a wage 20 per cent in excess of the wages paid in July, 1914, many of the districts would have been still worse off. The owners have made this minimum good. The additional cost of maintaining it and which comes directly out of profits, reserves, or bank overdrafts, amounts to approximately three million pounds. The principle of a guaranteed minimum wage is fundamental in any agreement between employers and workmen, and this Agreement has proved it to be the case, and whatever the future holds in store for us we must be prepared to stand at all times for the maintenance of this principle. There are those among you who have opposite views as to the value of the Agreement. But I would ask you in all your deliberations to distinguish between the misfortunes that have befallen the industry in consequence of the breakdown of international trade and any alleged misfortunes that have come upon the industry, and the workmen in particular, in consequence of this Agreement. You know my own view upon the Agreement—namely, that the principles underlying it are sound. We must approach the future with the greatest possible care. The Executive and the Officers of the Federation must have your complete confidence. You must trust them to act in your best interest in

the critical days that are to come, and I feel sure that if this spirit prevails, as far as the workmen of the industry are concerned everything will be done to improve the conditions of the industry.

OBITUARIES.

We have lost during the year in more ways than those of wages and conditions of labour. We have lost some of our most venerable and remarkable miners' leaders. Thomas Burt (Northumberland), William Abraham (Mabon), John Williams (of the South Wales Miners' Federation) have passed to their long rest. Their lives were a shining example to the young men of the present generation; for service rendered, for love of their fellows, their lives bear the highest testimony. They helped to build the Miners' Federation, and their work must be worthily carried forward. To the relatives of these and the relatives of those of our other members who though perhaps not so prominently have given their best to the movement, who, too, have passed away during this year, we offer our sincerest condolences and deepest sympathy, and we say that the dedication of our lives to the work of the movement shall contain a resolve that not one jot or tittle of the good work accomplished by our leaders who have passed away shall be lost to the movement by any act of ours or by any neglect of duty.

AMERICAN VISIT.

It has been my privilege during the year to represent the British Trade Union movement at the Congress of the American Confederation of Labour. My visit coincided with the American miners' strike. The organised American mineworkers have been out from the 1st April this year resisting reductions in wages, &c. In this struggle they are not only trying to defend themselves against the employers, but also against the Supreme Court, who is issuing injunctions against them on every hand to restrain them from holding meetings, from peaceful picketing, and are even going so far as to endeavour to prevent the United Mineworkers of America from paying the benefits due to their members through the organisation, and this when they have stopped work strictly in accordance with service of contract. It was only when the leaders of the American mineworkers told the judge that if his decision meant their looking on and seeing their members' wives and children starve they should refuse to obey the findings the judge modified his decision with regard to paying benefits. I was glad to learn how much the American mineworkers appreciated the early inquiries of our Secretary, Mr. Hodges, who asked them in what way the Miners' International Federation could help them, he promising at the same time that whatever suggestions they had to make would have the due consideration of the Miners' International Federation. The United Mineworkers have shown wonderful resistance against the mine-owners' attempts at encroachment on their wages and conditions, and also against the supposed Supreme Court of Justice in its attempt to break up the *bona-fide* trade union organisation. When we remember that the American mineworkers have never been fully employed—even last year they had to play 139 days out of a possible 308, owing to the output being far in excess of the demand; also, having only a small amount of finance in their funds, have only been able to give relief to a few members in the various States who were utterly destitute—we are bound to admire the stand they are making. It may be said that their stoppage is not as complete as ours was last year, which is true; but we must remember that the United Mineworkers of America is not only a national, but an international organisation, so that whilst 600,000 mineworkers have been resisting the oppression of the capitalists and law courts nearly 150,000 non-union mineworkers have continued working, and have been producing nearly 5,000,000 tons of coal per week. I was sorry

I had not the opportunity of going into the coalfields and addressing some meetings of the mineowners to give a few words of encouragement to them, but from the observation I obtained of the attacks made upon the workers in general in America I am still more confirmed in my belief that the workers of the world must become more united in the future than they have been in the past, both industrially and politically. We must recognise the old saying: "He that owns the means whereby I live owns my life." It is only by unity in the international sense we shall control conditions of labour in a way that will be more humane and advantageous to all workers.

POLITICAL SITUATION.

Finally, I must make one reference to the political situation. It is quite possible that before we assemble at another Annual Conference of the M.F.G.B. this country will have passed through a general election. The Labour Party is making a supreme effort to secure the confidence of the mass of the working classes. It will challenge this Government upon great questions of policy, and will go to the country with a programme of a far-reaching kind. In this programme will be a matter of the greatest possible importance to the Miners' Federation, and that is the question of the nationalisation of mines. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain will be responsible for round about 60 of the Labour Party's candidates. These 60 representatives will appeal for the support of the miners and their wives in the great mining constituencies. They will similarly appeal for the support of the working class, both men and women, in those constituencies. In the interval most candidates will do all they can to educate public opinion in the direction of securing by constitutional means radical changes in the organisation of the mining industry. But, apart from the nationalisation of mines, the miners and their wives will be called upon to express their condemnation of the Government for its treatment of the industry during the last few years, and I trust that the memory of the many wrongs from which they have suffered will enable them to declare that the Government which is responsible for them must hand over the reins of office, never again to take them up. I feel at this point that I must say, judging from the reports received from the districts, how much they appreciate the work of our Secretary, Mr. Hodges, in speaking in the various constituencies and districts during the past year. Politics will form an important part of our activity during the next four years; hence the reason why our opponents are attempting to cripple our political powers at the present time by the Trade Union Amendment Bill at present before the House of Commons. I ask you to speedily get strong, both industrially and politically, for your strength will be the measure of your programme in the days that are to come.