

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

PAST AND PRESENT CONDITIONS.

Mr. HERBERT SMITH (President): Friends: Once again we are gathered together for our Annual Conference deliberations. This Conference marks yet another milestone on the long path to peace and happiness for the mining community. The year through which we have passed has been a black one, but our situation to-day is not as bad as it was at our last Annual Conference. A year ago practically every district was on the minimum, with the cost of living much higher than it is to-day.

COST OF LIVING.

The year has witnessed a small decrease in the cost of living for us all. This has been all to the good. If it could be reduced down to pre-war level much of the trouble in our own industry, and, for that matter, in the industry of Great Britain, would disappear.

WAGES MINIMUM.

On the other hand we rejoice to see to-day that several of our districts are receiving advances in wages above the minimum. One district, namely, South Wales, which for a long time (in fact, for the longest time) has been on the minimum, this month joins five others whose wages are above the minimum. But, despite these two pleasing features of our present mining life, there are still seven of our districts employing between them 210,000 men, or 18 per cent. of the total, where the workmen are still at the minimum; a point at which they have stuck for the last 18 months. What is this minimum wage? There is still a great deal of ignorance, and I am sorry to say, in many cases, indifference, on the part of the outside public as to the meaning of the minimum wage in the present agreement. Let us be frank and admit at once that many of our piece-workers are earning fair wages by hard grinding toil at the coal-face. Let us admit that there are some day-workers whose standards have been improved since 1914, and who are to-day, in consequence, getting more than 20 per cent. above their 1914 wage. But, on the other hand, we declare from intimate knowledge and bitter experience, that there are men in many of our districts, aye, in their scores of thousands, whose day wages—for they are day-workers—are not more, by one penny, than 20 per cent. above their actual wages of 1914.

GENERAL PUBLIC AND WAGES, ETC.

How in the name of common humanity does the public imagine these men can live, maintain their families and continue their work on a wage which is only 20 per cent. pre-war, with the cost of living 69 per cent. above pre-war? I must tell the outside world that it means the degradation of a very praiseworthy body of men. It has in many instances meant starvation. Everything that could have been done to better their lot by peaceful means has been attempted.

NEGOTIATIONS.

There have been negotiations with the coalowners, negotiations with the Government, debates on the floor of the House of Commons on Labour Party motions, and a debate in the House of Commons on our own Miners' Minimum Wage Bill.

SUBSISTENCE WAGE.

Where the subsistence wage has been in operation for these men, it has latterly been secured by the willingness of the higher-paid piece-worker to defer possible advances for themselves under the agreement, because of the extra charge upon the proceeds caused by increasing the wage of the lower-paid men.

ABSORPTION OF UNEMPLOYED.

The spokesmen for the coalowners in the House of Commons spoke of the way in which our unemployed men had been absorbed in the industry. They congratulated the industry upon having done so fine a thing. We, too, are glad, but we know that the inrush of men has been maintained at the expense of the wage level of many of the rest. The rapid absorption of unemployed has not been achieved without sacrifice, but so splendid is the strength of brotherhood in the mining industry that it has been borne cheerfully. The coalowners' spokesmen in the House of Commons, and the Government spokesmen, may keep their cheap congratulations. They have not fed an empty stomach, nor provided a pair of boots for a miner's child. Poor districts in which this state of things exists, have had, and will continue to have, the special care of the Federation. It is a big problem, it is unlike the problem in any other industry. A solution has been offered the coalowners. In their hearts they know it is sound. A solution has been submitted to the Government, but they have preferred to be either indifferent or hostile.

OBJECTS AND CO-OPERATION.

Our aim is to provide our men in all districts who do a fair day's work with a wage at present sufficient in amount to ensure the pre-war standard of living. I do not think it is beyond our skill in this industry to make that possible now, if the coalowners would only co-operate with us. But they will not. We must, therefore, prepare our plans in order that we might be able, at the right time, to ensure for our people what the coalowner and the Government deny them. We warn the owners, too, that we are aware that in the better-off districts the agreement is yielding a profit per ton far higher than can be justified, and that we shall soon take the proper steps to get it on to a more just basis. This does not mean that I am in favour of giving notice to terminate the agreement forthwith. I am definitely opposed to terminating the agreement now. Such a step would lead to disaster, whilst the present position of the poor districts would be made far worse. I am willing to try once again to induce the owners to agree to submit to the independent Chairman our claim for a modification of some of the clauses in the agreement, especially the one relating to the proportion which profits bear toward wages, but I want it to be clearly understood that Herbert Smith is not going to be a party to a movement which he believes in advance will end only in disaster.

HOURS.

Whenever and wherever we have stated our claim for a living wage for our people, we have been met with the proposal for an extension of our working day. The owners seem to think, at least they want the public to think, that the men have it in their own hands to get a wage equal to the cost of living. There are hundreds of thousands of day-wage men, and these are our lowest

wage earners, who would not gain a single farthing by lengthening the working day, whilst, on the other hand, piece-workers may, indeed, suffer a reduction in wages by the loss of the percentage increase due to the reduction in the hours from eight to seven. The Seven Hours' Act has been in operation for four years. It has been tried and found to be one of the greatest blessings ever bestowed on the mining industry. It has brought advantages to the miners and their families, without any corresponding disadvantages to the public. Let me say here, whether the coalowners have been serious in their proposition or not, or whether they have put forward the propositions for lengthening the working day merely to divert public attention from the issue of the living wage for the men. The seven hours has been tried. It is a great benefit to our people, and never, never will the miners of this country go back upon it, whatever the circumstances.

MEMBERSHIP.

During the year, especially in the early part, membership in many of our districts seriously declined. In some districts it declined to a greater extent than in others. But, due to the determined work on the part of the district and branch officials, of the lodge committees, and of the stalwart trades unionists themselves at the pit, the tide has turned, and in every district there are welcome signs of a restoration of the original membership. I have no doubt, that with still further care and organization, our membership will not be far short of 1,000,000 at the end of next year. A strong organization is the need of the hour, and the more the organization is built up by men of free choice, the stronger it will be. Compulsion may be necessary in certain cases. But I would rather have an army of trades unionists from conviction than an army from compulsion.

ACCIDENTS IN MINES.

Whilst we have no information as to the number of fatal and non-fatal accidents for the year ending June, 1923, we have the Government's statement as to the number of fatal accidents up to the end of December, 1922. They are as follows :—

No. of deaths caused by fatal accidents in ...	1921	1922
Mines under Coal Mines Act, 1911 ...	755	1,100
Metalliferous Mines Act, 1872	12	9
Quarries Act, 1894	46	44
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	813	1,153
	<hr/>	<hr/>

We do know, however, that the explosions and large fatal accidents during this year have been, unfortunately, numerous. There have been :—

Name of Colliery.	No. of Men.
Plean	12
St. Helens	6
Wheldale	8
Medomsley	8
Shute	4
Trimsarin	9
Apedale Footrill	8

The death and accident roll is too high, and can be reduced.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCTIONS OF ACCIDENTS, ETC.

The appointment of additional inspectors with extended powers may help in this direction. But, in my judgment, the real way to avoid accidents is to give the workmen at the pits a larger share of control in the operations which

make for the safety of the mines. The law should be so amended as to provide the workman with power to prosecute the management for breach of the Act, instead of that power exclusively resting in the hands of the colliery manager to prosecute the men, or the mines inspector to prosecute both.

COMPENSATION ACTS.

Whilst on the subject of accidents, I should like to express my opinion on the proposal for amending the Workmen's Compensation Act by the Government. It is true that the War Additions Act comes to an end in December of this year. It is also true that the Government would have been compelled to introduce a measure for the continuance in a new Act of the war legislation, but the working classes of this country were entitled to expect the Government, in view of the Holman Gregory Report, to have amended the Workmen's Compensation Act in the light of present-day requirements, and in the light of the recommendations of this Committee. The workers had expected a new compensation charter in this country, but the Government declines to proceed with the task. The Labour Party thereupon introduced its own Bill, which embodied this charter, but the Government would not support it. On the other hand, they introduced in the House a measure of their own, which certainly makes some improvement over the pre-war Compensation Act in respect of fatal accidents, but falls short of what is necessary for the present day, as to meet with the general disapproval of the Labour Movement. The Government has shown no breadth of vision in this matter. It seems as though they have been under the influence of big business—and this is but natural. The Labour Party has done everything in their power to improve this Act in Committee, and have in fact, obtained some slight improvement, for which we are grateful. Nevertheless, it is our business to set our faces towards the day when we shall have a Workmen's Compensation Act worthy of the position of British industry in the world, and worthy of the people who make that industry possible. It may be that we shall have to wait until the Labour Party comes into power before such legislation is attained. Nevertheless, we shall strive to improve the lot of our injured and maimed workmen, of the widow and dependents, of the fatherless and the orphans whose breadwinner has lost his life in the course of earning that daily bread.

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION.

Turning for a moment from the affairs of the mining industry in this country to the international position, I must say that the situation is far from hopeful. It is not my business nor my wish to go into the questions connected with international politics, but, being a coal-exporting country, we are very sensitive to any abnormalities in other countries, and more particularly in European countries. The occupation of the Ruhr has upset the normal life of Germany. For a brief moment, as was prophesied by our secretary, a little spurt was given to the British coal trade in consequence of the decline of production in the Ruhr. But we are already beginning to feel the after-effects. Already certain other trades in this country are beginning to be hit, and hit badly, in consequence of the occupation of the Ruhr. But I take another standard when judging this situation. I do not want the British mining industry to prosper at the expense of the German miners in the Ruhr. The British mining industry should only come to prosperity, and can only come to prosperity, in a peaceful and normal world. So was the case with Russia. The Government threat to destroy the trade agreement would have injured the British mining industry at once had it been carried out. It would have hit the British workmen as hard, if not harder, than the Russian workmen. Our country is principally an exporting country, and no Government has a greater need for influencing the nations in the direction of peace than our own, and no industry needs international

peace more than the British mining industry. Much has been done during this year to strengthen the bonds of unity between all the miners throughout Europe and America, and a much clearer understanding of our common needs has been arrived at than ever before.

LOSSES BY DEATH OF OFFICIALS, ETC.

Finally, I must make reference to those of our colleagues and comrades in the Miners' Federation of Great Britain who have passed away since our last Conference. There is William Buckley (South Derby), a gentle, kindly man, who did his duty to his people in a quiet and unassuming but very effective manner; and John Cairns, that devoted and painstaking brother, whose life was a record of service to his fellows. I am also sorry to have to record the death of our friend Edward Gill, of the South Wales Miners' Federation, who died very suddenly a few weeks ago. Edward Gill was respected by all whom he came in contact with. He twice contested the Frome Division in Somerset on behalf of the Federation. The work to which they put their hands goes steadily on. Never again will they be with us in the flesh, but in spirit and in memory they will remain in our midst. Our sympathies go out to their dependents and relatives in their great distress. We bow our heads, too, in sincere sympathy with the widows and the fatherless children of those of our membership who have lost their lives in their daily toil during this year.

MR. SMILLIE IN PARLIAMENT.

Our industry is an industry of grief, but it has not dried up the fountains of fellow-feeling amongst us. On the other hand we rejoice to see the recovery to health of Mr. Smillie, who is sufficiently recovered to carry on the work, so abruptly ended, of our friend John Cairns. I am sure it is the wish of you all that Mr. Smillie will be spared for a long number of years to help to carry the work of our movement in Parliament, in conjunction with the other Members of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

THIS WEEK'S DELIBERATIONS.

Now, in conclusion, may your deliberations this week be characterized by a sense of comradeship, by high tone in debate, by sound judgment in decision, and by care and zeal for the welfare of those whom we represent. The Federation is again growing strong. We shall yet accomplish things worthy of our position in the British Labour Movement. The depression of the last two years has not destroyed our faith; our men are not built that way. Our task is still a heavy one, but I have not the slightest doubt but what we shall come out triumphant in the end.