

## PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

Mr. HERBERT SMITH (Chairman): Now, gentlemen, the least interesting part of this Conference has come, that is, the President's address. First, I want to welcome you back again to Scarborough after an interval of twelve years. The last Annual Conference held in Scarborough was in October, 1913, and on behalf of the Executive Committee I desire to give you a hearty welcome to this part of Yorkshire, and to express the hope that we may have a most successful Conference; that all the delegates and those who have accompanied them to this town may have a happy, a healthy, and an invigorating time. I trust that our visit here may not only be a business meeting which will be helpful to our membership in this great movement, but that it will also assist in building up a little bit of the exhausted strength of those who have taken a leading part in the movement.

### MEMBERSHIP.

In looking at the membership for 1913 I find we had something like 627,500 in the Federation. It is, indeed, a great pleasure to me to report on the splendid progress which this organisation has made since then, our membership now being 799,312, and this in face of the fact that we have been passing through a very difficult period owing to the large amount of unemployment, short time working, very low wages, and high cost of living. I think we can congratulate ourselves on our membership being at such a point at the present time. This speaks for itself. It shows the splendid manner in which our members have stuck to their trade union, knowing full well, as bad as the outlook is, if they had not had the assistance and protection of their organisation the employers would have attempted to take further advantage of their weakness. I also desire to bring to your notice that during the past few months we have added to our ranks the Durham Enginemen's Society, whom our friend Mr. Charlton represents, numbering 4,000. I sincerely hope their joining the Federation will be a mutual benefit to all of us. I would still impress upon those who are not in the Miners' Federation, who work in or about a mine, to at once become members, as they are much more useful inside the movement than outside. Whatever complaints there may be against the Miners' Federation no one can gainsay the fact that it has done wonderful service for its members, both industrially and politically.

## EVENTS SINCE 1913.

During the twelve years which have elapsed since we visited this borough the mine workers' career has been a very chequered one. The great war which overtook Europe and left such devastating effects over the whole world ought to be an object lesson to us in the future to oppose any attempt at war between us as workers in this particular country, and any other country. Wars have never yet been of any good to the workers if we read history. We are passing through very difficult times, from an industrial point of view, wages being much below cost of living and being faced with a serious unemployment problem, at the present time having 314,939 men unemployed. Roughly, in the mining industry, we have more than 1 out of 4 unemployed, and 2 out of 4 under-employed, also 2 out of 3 earning less than 40s. per week. Apart from the mining industry, other trades have suffered, and the present unemployment figure in Great Britain is 1,299,667.

## FORMING OF THE WORKERS' ALLIANCE.

On June 4 this year an important Conference took place in London at which upwards of three million workers were represented by about 125 delegates from the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, the National Union of Railwaymen, the Transport Workers' Federation, Transport and General Workers' Union, Amalgamated Engineering Union, Associated Society of Locomotive Enginemen and Firemen, Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Unions, Boilermakers, Iron and Steel Shipbuilders' Society, Railway Clerks' Association, National Union of Foundry Workers, and Electrical Trades Union. This Conference was called with the object of discussing the possibility of a closer working agreement for offensive or defensive action. After a free and full discussion the following resolution was arrived at unanimously:—

“That, in the opinion of this Conference, having regard to the present industrial situation, and the community of interest that must necessarily prevail amongst the organised workers, the furtherance of this movement could be best served by the appointment of a committee to consider the suggestions submitted to the Conference, and that each group of industry appoint two representatives to serve on the committee, their names to be submitted to Mr. Cook.”

As one who took part in that Conference I was delighted with it and am hoping we shall evolve such a working agreement as will be a benefit to the workers in the various industries. As we must have learnt by now, the workers of a single industry cannot stand alone. Long before the war it was becoming clear that no one industry by itself was able to carry through a fully successful struggle. After the war it was shown very clearly that immediately the workers in any one industry put up a fight the owners could rely with certainty on all the forces of the State being brought into play against the workers. Since 1921 the workers have gone through a very severe test. Serious reductions of wages have taken place when isolated unions have been attacked. At the present time the situation is not one of rising prosperity; on the contrary, the economic situation now is blacker than it was in 1921. This means we are forced back to defend the interests, nay, more, the very livelihood of our members; the home comforts and the bare necessities of life for the wives and children of our men. The best means we have is by united action properly directed. In a word, we must insist on a living wage, better working conditions, and proper housing for the workers being obtained and maintained. I am looking to forming such a working alliance that will not easily be broken. We must not behave like a flock of sheep who merely huddle together when threatened by the wolf; we must be prepared either for an offensive or a defensive policy. We must

make this a real workers' movement, which will defend the livelihood of the men, women, and children of this country by a resolute and determined action.

#### WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION.

The present Workmen's Compensation Act is far from being satisfactory with its inadequate benefits. We were sadly disappointed at the action of the Coalition Government who, after appointing a committee to go into this question, when that report was presented refused to accept its findings. I, along with you, protest against the action of the present Government in rejecting the Workmen's Compensation Bill introduced by the Labour Party this year. Further, there seems to be an attempt, in my opinion, to somewhat worsen the position so far as miners' nystagmus is concerned, which your Executive Committee is carefully watching in the interests of the workers, as there is a report emanating from five medical specialists who were appointed by the Government Research Committee. The position of workers suffering from nystagmus does not need to be made worse, but to be considerably improved. We have on record cases where the disease has been proved to cause insanity, and has even led to suicide. No Workmen's Compensation Act can be satisfactory which does not provide for the workers being allowed to return to their work after having recovered from accidents or industrial diseases, or be paid full compensation until such work is provided. Many employers are refusing to allow the men to recommence work. If workers go to seek work or are sent through the Labour Exchange they are asked by many managers if they have ever received an injury or suffered from miners' nystagmus. If their answer is "Yes," they are told at many collieries there is no work for them. Our policy must be even with the reactionary Government in power to do all we possibly can to amend this law in the interests not only of the miners and their dependants, but the workers generally.

#### ACCIDENTS IN MINES.

I have to report that for the year 1924, 1,201 of our fellow-workers were fatally injured in and about the mines. The number of non-fatal accidents from which the injured person played more than three days was 195,423. All these cases prove with all the glowing accounts we get from individuals about the miner's life that the miner's calling is a very hazardous one. We must still be determined to seek an overhauling of the Mines Act to make the safety clauses and the carrying out of the same more effective, as even one of the late Chief Inspectors of Mines commented upon and somewhat ridiculed certain sections in the Mines Act. He ought, of course, to have been one of the persons, while holding the position of Chief Inspector, to have suggested remedying these particular defects which he named. Last year, amongst other accidents, we reported the serious happening at Redding owing to an inrush of water. This year we have had two similar cases, one at Killan (Glamorgan), where five lives were lost; and the recent one at the Montagu Pit, Scottswood, Northumberland, where 38 lives were lost. This shows without doubt the great need for redrafting Section 68 of the Mines Act, which deals with the question of approaching disused workings. I am hoping that out of the Committee which is dealing with water dangers, on which Mr. Straker and Mr. Doonan are serving, there will emerge some material safeguards by the redrafting of this clause. You will notice that on your agenda from districts this particular danger is dealt with. In my opinion one of the first things the Government of the country ought to recognise is that working men inspectors appointed under Section 16 ought to be paid by the State. Also more practical mines inspectors ought to be appointed so that we could get an examination of every mine in the country at least three times a year. The deputy should be in a safe position to do his

duty, irrespective of employer or workman, by protection from the State as to his security of employment. I hope this question of redrafting the Mines Act will be no longer delayed, but that every attempt will be made to reduce loss of life and maiming of our men and boys to a minimum.

#### WAGES QUESTION.

There is no need to remind this Conference of the crisis which has developed more acutely by reason of the owners having taken up the aggressive position of tendering notice to end the present agreement. While I state unhesitatingly that the mine workers' wages are too low, and knowing the position the Miners' Federation is in from unemployment and under-employment, which has so materially affected our financial position, up to now I have not been able to see my way clear to take the action some people have been pressing forward; but, seeing the owners have taken the initiative and practically issued an ultimatum, which seeks to interfere with hours and wages, force upon us district settlements, no minimum percentage safeguarded but with a guaranteed profit to the owners irrespective of the present low wages, refusing to include coke and by-products plants, &c., in the industry, and other retrograde steps, I have no qualms now, realising full well the gravity and seriousness of the situation and what it may mean, of advising the Miners' Federation to resist to its fullest capacity. I am hoping that this attempt on the owners' part to depress miners' wages, lengthen hours, &c., will have the full support of the whole of the trade union movement in Great Britain. I am also convinced the present state of the industry is because the owners have not attempted to take the mine workers into their confidence, as provided for in Part (2) of the Mining Industry Act, 1920. They have never really tried to make the findings of the Commission presided over by Justice Sankey a success. Whether the country did believe in nationalisation or not it will be driven to it as the only possible solution in order to save the mining industry with the opposition the mine owners are showing to the suggestions contained in the report of the Sankey Commission in these words:—"It is stated that it is in the interests of the country that the colliery workers shall in future have an effective voice in the management of the mines. For a generation the colliery worker has been educated socially and technically, the result is a national asset, why not use it?" Every time any attempt has been made of late to get the owners to agree to this they have been just as determined in their opposition as they were at the Commission. Finally, I advise the mine workers that any National Agreement which may be set up must make provision for wages commensurate with the cost of living at least.

#### INTERNATIONAL.

I am glad to report that we have got a full-time International Secretary (Mr. Frank Hodges) who commenced his duties on May 1st this year, and I trust he will have health and strength given to him to carry out his duties.

I am informed that the work of compiling information as to the conditions of work, wages, and hours in the various coal-producing countries is well in hand.

The main purpose of our Miners' International will be to establish uniformity of purpose amongst the world's mine workers, to secure uniformity of conditions on the basis of the very best situated countries, and thus destroy unfair competition, which unceasingly tends to pull down the conditions of the highest and best to the level of the lowest and worst. This task is by no means an easy one nor a speedy one. Race difficulties, frontiers, economic differences, all present obstacles, but in time they will be overcome.

## POLITICAL.

Twelve months ago we congratulated the Labour movement as a whole upon the fact that chance had given Ramsay MacDonald the opportunity of accepting the Premiership and forming a Labour Government for the first time in British history. That was a great experiment and demonstrated to the world that Labour was as fit, if not fitter, to govern than any other section of the nation. That, at any rate, was one solid gain so far as the movement and the British people are concerned.

There have been critics of Labour's nine months of office—perhaps some of the most violent being in our own ranks. The main fact that many such seem to forget is that from the very first the Labour Government was not in a position to control Parliament—that there indeed, as a plain matter of fact, the working-class electors themselves, by voting for a larger number of Liberal and Tory members, had loaded the dice against the Labour Ministry from the outset. Within the narrow limits that such a Parliamentary position imposed, the Labour Government more than justified our trust. The violence of the attack made upon it by the combined politicians of the older parties was ample evidence that Labour was making good. They were much too successful to be tolerated for a full year. The development of Labour's policy of peace in Europe and the resumption of decent relations with Russia would have been far too successful nationally and internationally to have been combated by our political enemies.

The prospect of extensive building of houses "to let" under the Wheatley scheme, and probably, above all, the fear of having to face the taxation of land and accumulated wealth in a second Snowden Budget, were far too threatening for the political friends of the rich to view with quiet minds. A plain pact in Parliament brought the Labour Government down, and a plain pact in the constituencies assisted to reduce the number of our people in the House though it helped to increase the Labour vote in the country. The Liberals sought to play as political dictators over the fortunes of the Labour Party, but it is the Liberals who have been seeking for themselves ever since.

The "Red Letter," it is acknowledged, was one of the deciding factors in the fight. I do not need to repeat its history here, but I would venture to say that should it ever become known how such a State document—as it was alleged to be—came into the hands of the most reactionary of our newspaper editors, we shall be in a better position to understand how cheaply the capitalists and upper classes hold the intelligence of the British people. We shall also have some more adequate idea of the fearful terror they had lest Labour should gain real power.

But the Labour Ministry, with its successes and its shortcomings, its gains and its blunders, has passed into history and generations in the future will be able to look back with satisfaction upon Labour's first attempt at national government.

With regard to the election and the Labour Party in the constituencies generally, let me say that of all the sections of the British working-class movement we miners still remain the most solid and staunchest in our loyalty to our political principles. Were other workers in the constituencies as true to the Labour Party as our people are, a Labour Government with full power to bring about the changes we all desire would be a certainty. There may be something in our daily occupation that helps us to realise our common purposes more clearly than in other industries. Our long, long fights against the owners of the coal that we have to win—the comradeship and co-operation that comes to us all below ground, the dangers that our people are always risking, and the manner in which we have to live close together in our mining towns and villages above ground—these common

experiences all lie at the roots of our political ideas and convictions, just as they are the reason for our solid trade-unionism. On the whole, I suppose we miners are looked upon as a pretty clannish lot. I only wish the men in other industries were as solid and as clannish—as conscious of their needs and as sure of the means of satisfying them. Until the workers as a whole do realise the real importance of their work in national life and carry that realisation into their politics, there is no possible likelihood of poverty being abolished, our capitalist wage system being swept away, and the nation attending to its own national needs in a sensible and scientific way.

We have to-day a pretty solid Tory Parliament; so numerous indeed are the Government supporters that they have adopted something like a shift system of working. The Labour men are so easily outnumbered in the Division Lobbies that the Tory Whips have divided their flock into sections, some to hold the fort in the House of Commons, while the others, in relays, can neglect their Parliamentary work in order to come down and lecture us, miners and others, on the evil effects of “ca’ canny” and the need for our working longer hours at our jobs; and all through the game Mr. Baldwin’s pipes of industrial peace and the beauties of pious contentment.

I do not need to refer at length to the work of the Government since they took office. It is a rich man’s Government, and it is doing the work of its masters thoroughly and cleverly. The owners of the land, the holders of capital, the well-to-do have nothing to fear from Mr. Baldwin or his friends. They steadily oppose every measure in which Labour is interested. They believe in the present system of industry though they see everywhere its inadequacy to supply the people with the security of employment, the provision of a decent existence that could be provided had they but the will.

One result of the uprising of Labour to its present position is that Labour speeches and Labour appeals are more widespread than they were in the days when to be a trade-unionist was to be a criminal, and to be a Socialist was worse. The fighters who have preceded us have won a hearing for our gospel. We must keep faith with them and see that the message they fought to deliver is passed on, and I venture to rescue from a letter written over forty years ago by William Morris a few words that seem to me to need saying now much more than ever. Remember William Morris was a rich man, an artist, a writer, a poet, a craftsman, and above all a Socialist:—

“In looking into matters social and political I have but one rule, that in thinking of the condition of any body of men I should ask myself ‘How could you bear it yourself? what would you feel if you were poor against the system under which you live?’ I have always been uneasy when I had to ask myself that question, and of late years I have had to ask it so often that I have seldom had it out of my mind; and the answer to it has more and more made me ashamed of my own position, and more and more made me feel that if I had not been born rich or well-to-do I should have found my position unendurable, and should have been a mere rebel against what would have seemed to me a system of robbery and injustice. Nothing could argue me out of this feeling, which I say plainly is a matter of religion to me: the contrasts of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor.”

Morris’s words may well remain with us always, for there will be no peace in this land or any other until this unendurable system is abolished. We miners have done and are doing our share in the task, for many, aye, most of our own folk are suffering hardships to-day that would have seemed incredible to the Socialists of forty years ago. Nevertheless, we must plod on.

In Labour politics, as in trade-unionism, we have to close our ranks, find real unity with our fellow-workers in other industries and in other countries.

As miners, we shall have much to learn and have much to teach. We must seek closer working with all who work. We must seek to strengthen the local Labour Parties, encourage our women to share in the work of the women's sections of the party, and our youth to find their education and training, their pleasure and their profit in the new movements that are springing up for their service. On the industrial side, too, we can do much to strengthen the common purposes of our fellow-trade-unionists in other industries by helping to develop the industrial committees and foster local discussions of our national problems of trade union structure and organisation, and promote trade-unionism generally in all the localities where our influence can be usefully exerted. We must pursue and strengthen our policy of aiding our people to win seats on local councils, and, whilst we use the present administrative power to the utmost, we shall have no difficulty in showing to friend and foe alike that the present limits must be widened.

We must not neglect Parliament because Labour is overwhelmed by the Tory hosts. On the contrary, we hope our people will put up a steady running fight—maybe many a hopeless fight. But they and we must remember that thoughtful people are watching Parliament more and more, and honest straightforward argument—a clear statement of Labour's case on every possible occasion—is of the greatest value in heartening our folk in the country and educating the nation at large. More particularly it will show to that never-ending stream of young people pouring out of our schools year by year the real problems of life which await them—the responsibilities and duties to their fellows that they will have to shoulder, and which it will be their greatest privilege to share. We have come through very black days, but we shall win through yet. We shall see daylight all the sooner just so far as we and other working people like us have faith in ourselves and trust each other.

There is no shorter cut to the new Britain we seek than by getting our people to use intelligently the power they already have. By the right use of that power—unitedly, steadily, consciously—they can gain all that is worth while in life. Such a full life is their due for the service they render. To achieve such a full life is a duty they owe to themselves, to their fellow-workers everywhere, and to the generations yet to come.

#### DEATHS.

We have lost during the year one of the pioneers of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. I refer to our deceased Bro. Alderman Edward Hughes, Secretary of the North Wales Miners' Association. He was an active worker whose advice and counsel I always appreciated. Whilst amongst us he played his part, and in my address to this Annual Conference I should be lacking in my duty if I did not place on record how deeply I along with you sympathise with his relatives, and with the miners of North Wales. I, also, along with you wish to extend our deepest sympathy to the relatives of those 1,201 men and boys who have met with fatal accidents underground and on the surface during 1924.