

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS.

CHAIRMAN:—Now gentlemen you will find on your agenda an item "The President's Address." First of all I want to welcome the delegates of our Federation to Llandudno. You will remember that the last time we held our Annual Conference in this town was in 1921. In addition to the welcome which I personally give to all the delegates, I do so on behalf of the Executive, and express the hope that we may have a most successful Conference here, and that all the delegates and those who may have accompanied any of the delegates to this town, may have a happy, healthy, and invigorating time. In all conscience at the present moment, in the present state of the Labour Movement, many men who are actively engaged in it, in spite of everything said about Labour leaders being parasites, fattening on the hard-earned pence of the workers, I happen to know, being in the inner circle, that from time to time, those who are taking heartily and unselfishly an active part in the Labour Movement, especially in such stirring times through which we have come, since 1926 particularly, there is no doubt they do require from time to time to get a breath of sea-air. I hope 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 be helpful in building up a little bit of the exhausted strength of those taking a leading part in the movement.

 ORGANISATION.

I propose to deal first of all with the question of membership, which we all realise is so tremendously and gravely important. When last we met in this town we called the roll with 131 delegates, representing 957,610. Last year at Southport that figure had shrunk to 784,986, whilst at the present moment we have 625,576 members. This should of necessity cause all of us seriously to think. The year through which we have passed has proved a severe test to our people. We had many prophets in various walks of life prophesying all manner of gloomy forebodings as to what was likely to happen. Unfortunately, one has reluctantly to admit facts. Our membership has gone down. Why? There have been divers agencies at work, such as for example: Unemployment; low wages; debts; internal differences.

These have all been factors, and another very potent factor has been when an association has been unable to assist a member financially any longer under its rules, that member has eventually ceased to pay in most cases, purely and simply because, whilst he was willing, he had not the means to continue to pay. We have, of course, the regrettable spectacle of men refusing to join up with their Trades Union. It is, indeed, incredible this should happen. They may be obtaining a temporary gain, but it cannot last. Sooner or later retribution will come upon them, because they will have to be tackled as they are a vital menace to the well-being of the organised working-class movement.

The question of membership is not merely a matter for the officials from the highest to the humblest, but must be the concern of everyone of us in the movement. It is only by being well-organised we can have any chance of successfully combating the combinations of employers with all their ramifications and financial backing now in existence.

Our organisation was by no means perfect. Breaches in our armour were made by our opponents during the last struggle, and I realise there is need for enquiry into our methods of organisation. Whilst not wishing to anticipate any discussion there may be here this week on this subject I most certainly cannot subscribe to some of the ideas put forward as a means of remedying

defects. I am, however, satisfied that we have within our present constitution the nucleus, and the machinery upon which to frame such a structure as will enable this Federation effectively to preserve and improve the economic status of our people.

I should like to say in connection with this matter of membership, and organisation, that I personally, on behalf of the Federation, wish to give public utterance of our thanks to the rank and file of the Miners' movement for their splendid loyalty and courage during the late dispute, and also in the intervening period up to this conference. I am sure that never in the industrial history of the world was there anything like the splendid enthusiasm and loyalty displayed through a dispute. Fault was found with the leaders, but I have never found a dispute yet where the conclusions have been unsatisfactory, but what fault has been found with the leaders, whether there is any truth in it or not, but nobody can say anything else, but that the rank and file of our movement displayed a courage and devotion to this Federation, and to the cause of Labour that could not be surpassed, and will probably never be surpassed in the history of industrial warfare.

HOURS.

I do not think I need say much with respect to the question of hours as it is a subject with which you are all familiar. The history of this Federation is essentially wrapped up in the question of hours. We agitated until there was an enactment restricting the hours of workers, top and bottom. Underground workers being employed not more than seven hours from the last man going down to the first man coming up. This was taken away from us as part of the plot designed by the Government and the coal owners. The policy of this Federation must be one of striving both politically and industrially until we achieve the goal of six hours including both winding times for underground workers, and shorter hours in proportion for surface workers. The result of the last struggle has placed us in a very invidious position so far as other countries affiliated to the Miners' International are concerned, because we are unfortunately working longer hours than any other country in Europe. I have gathered from the information available that the following hours are worked in the various continental countries, namely, France, $7\frac{1}{2}$; Belgium, $7\frac{1}{2}$; Holland, 8; Germany, 8; Upper Silesia, 8; Czecho Slovakia, $7\frac{3}{4}$ to 8. These times include both winding times. In Britain our hours are from $7\frac{1}{2}$ to 8, excluding both winding times. This means, where there are $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours in operation, men are roughly below ground over 8 hours. Where there are 8 hours underground that means over $8\frac{1}{2}$.

WAGES QUESTION.

We all realise the importance of our wages and the method of regulating them. As a result of our having been driven back to District Settlements there have been indirect reductions forced upon the workmen which have seriously affected their outlook. Whilst unemployment is serious, yet, when men are at work their earnings are very low with a higher production because of the method which is being adopted in cutting price list rates and taking advantage of the economic position of the Industry without any regard to Agreements that have been honourably entered into by both Parties. This has been done without any altered working conditions.

The policy of this Federation must be a National Agreement with a minimum for all workers engaged in or about a Mine.

The present method of regulating wages by Ascertainments is unsatisfactory and at the same time costly. Whilst a good deal of information is being obtained, there is certainly a suspicion on the part of the workers that essential items and transactions are not being disclosed in the manner which we desire.

ACCIDENTS.

I regret that I have to place before you the following list of deaths from explosions where three or more than three were affected :—

DATE.	COLLIERY	NO. OF DEATHS.	NATURE.
1927.			
14th July	Bickerstaffe (Lancashire)	3	Explosion
6th August	Cardowan (Scotland)	3	"
7th November	Eden (Durham)	3	"
13th December	Haigh (Cumberland)	4	"
1928.			
11th February	Haigh (Cumberland)	13	"
13th April	Waterloo Main (Yorkshire)	3	"

I have dealt with this problem on very many occasions; and have suggested various methods of bringing about reforms. I notice in the discussion in the House of Commons on Thursday, 21st June, the Secretary for Mines (Commodore Douglas King) attempted to deal with this question by somewhat attributing carelessness on the part of the workmen. He talked about "Safety First." I would like personally to see some indication of the idea of "Safety First" being carried out, because in some pits I have visited from time to time I have not seen many signs of this being adopted. May I suggest to the Secretary for Mines that if he wants to learn anything about carelessness, and the proper carrying out of the Mines Act he ought to spend some little time down a mine, and then he would be in a position to speak with more authority. I say to him, having been in this movement since 1872, I resent such remarks because I declare from my own experience that miners, as a class, are not careless or indifferent to their own or their mates' safety.

Men with courage in many instances who speak as to negligence or shortage of timber, or the manner in which examinations are carried out, are those who are victimised. If the Secretary for Mines stands for more safety, then those men who are willing and ready to speak out truthfully should be encouraged and defended when they do so. If this were done I am satisfied we should have less accidents both fatal and otherwise.

When dealing with accidents we must remember that there are considerably less men working now than there were, with a less number of days worked.

The number of fatal accidents during last twelve months was 1,121, and the number injured 172,611.

I am convinced that this number would be materially reduced by the Government taking over the responsibility for paying men to inspect the mines under Section 16 of the Mines Act and defending those men after they have done their duty, because the owners at many mines make it exceedingly difficult for the provisions of Section 16 of the Mines Act to be effectively carried out owing to the economic position of the men making inspections.

We are continually boasting about taking the lead, but we have to remember that many of our continental comrades in the mining industry have the right to appoint and the State to pay the preponderating number of mines inspectors. The workers will be able to remedy these outstanding defects when they feel disposed to use up to the hilt their industrial and political power in the proper way.

WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION.

While your Committee and the National Labour Party have been dealing with this question from various points of view very little headway has been made with the reactionary Government in power. The operation of the Workmen's Compensation Act has become more acute in the last two or three years, and it is absolutely essential that workmen suffering from accident or industrial disease should have better provision made for them. We cannot sit quietly by and see our fellow workmen after they have been declared fit for work thrown on the industrial scrap-heap by the employers refusing them employment. To-day we have hundreds of men victimised owing to being amongst the unfortunates who have happened to have accidents or contracted industrial diseases whilst following their occupation as workers in or about mines. There seems to be in many districts a dead set by the employers refusing to reinstate men who have been suffering from miner's nystagmus. No Workmen's Compensation Act can, therefore, be satisfactory which does not guarantee when a man is certified fit for work being found work or full compensation paid.

PENSIONS.

We have many times had this question under review at our Annual Miners' Conferences, and I feel everyone will agree it is more than ever necessary to-day that the veterans of industry should be so provided for as to enable them to remain citizens by their own fireside during their declining days. Workers are being stopped wholesale between the ages of 60 and 65 years.

Many employers when applying for workmen through the Labour Exchange stipulate they shall not exceed the age of 45 years.

This Federation has collected information from time to time, and obtained expert opinion upon it. We are told what a difficult proposition it is to solve for the workers, yet how easy for some classes of society. Take the Speaker of the House of Commons, policemen and others, where pensions are provided. We have only been able to procure for the workers what one can simply designate as a mere acknowledgement when three-score years and ten have been reached, with the exception of the new scale which makes provision under certain circumstances for a pension at 65, and yet acts adversely in the case of others.

There are thousands of our aged workers between 55 and 70 dependent upon the niggardly hand of the Poor Law, either outside or inside the Institution.

Don't let us forget what the pioneers of this movement accomplished in the way of reform.

Their struggles should spur us on to greater deeds as we ought to take advantage of their experience, and press for pensions being established by utilising:—

- (a) A levy on mining royalties.
- (b) An extension of the miners' welfare levy.

I believe in this way a fund could be inaugurated from which an adequate pension could be disbursed to workers at an age when the employers decided they had no further use for them.

UNEMPLOYMENT.

Unemployment has become one of the most distressing factors of our social and industrial life. Almost every economic problem revolves round it. If unemployment could be eliminated then many of the evils from which we are now suffering would vanish.

The manner in which reputable statesmen have attempted to deal with this question is tragic.

- (a) By reducing the Unemployment Allowance.
- (b) By making it more difficult for people to qualify.
- (c) The way in which thousands of people have been thrown off the Benefits, and have had to seek Poor Law Relief.

This is wrong in principle, degrading and oppressive to the District mostly affected.

The Miners are having to battle with poverty and starvation, and yet we see on the other hand many people have more than they know what to do with.

We all visualise what is going on, the suffering of the men, women and children, so much so that this problem of unemployment must of necessity be regarded as a National one, and my solution must be National in character.

The question of unemployment is a very severe drag on the finances of Unions affiliated to this Federation, in fact it is becoming so serious that unless there is a diminution in the number of claims, steps may have to be taken to curtail payments under this head. The responsibility for this state of affairs rests largely with the employers launching schemes of one kind or another which I think could be best characterised as ca' canny schemes, restricting output, causing pits to work intermittently and periodically playing six, seven, eight and ten days in succession. By this means they are undermining our financial resources.

MINERS' INTERNATIONAL.

I will very briefly refer to the international Miners' Congress which was well attended in view of the economic position of the various National Organisations. I believe whilst there are many obstacles to be overcome, a decided step was taken towards a better feeling, and a greater knitting together of the Miners' International than for some time past.

It only requires a strict allegiance to the Constitution, Rules, and Decisions, of the International in order to consummate the ideal of an International embracing the mine workers of all countries.

The exigencies of the position are impelling all nationalities to think internationally, and, therefore, it behoves us to concentrate on a well-organised Miners' International in order to protect the interests of our people.

PEACE IN INDUSTRY.

I believe there has been a good deal of unnecessary feeling introduced into this question. Personally I am going to make my position perfectly clear. I am one of those people who believe that every effort ought to be made to get a common understanding, and fair play for all those interested in the Industry.

I think the General Council did the right thing when they accepted the invitation from the employers to meet and discuss this question to see how far they could get to an understanding on general principles.

I have seen no cause to alter that opinion, although during the period whilst the General Council were meeting we have been meeting our various employers, and so far as the mining industry is concerned not much sympathy or fair play has been shown, in fact, victimisation has been the order of the day, carried out in a very callous fashion.

I remember in January this year being at a meeting of our employers when I referred to a speech which had been delivered by one of them and asked if he meant what he said, that he was out for peace and fair play. If so, I was prepared to sit down and see what could be done. After a few moments' hesitation he said, "Smith, are you prepared to refrain from preaching nationalisation of the mines, etc., and persuade your men to do likewise. If so, then I can talk to you." My reply was very short, that the only solution to the mining problem was, nationalisation of the mines embracing as well royalties, by-products, etc.

This has in no way daunted me from still believing that nothing will be lost by these meetings. I have no fear of the General Council or its representatives committing this Federation or any other body to any principle until they have first submitted it to the various units affiliated to the Trades Union Congress for their approval or otherwise.

POLITICAL.

When we turn to the political field there are two outstanding events to be noticed: the first, the giving of the vote to the daughters of the nation; and the second, the General Election that must come next year at the very latest. The passing away last month of Mrs. Pankhurst reminded us of the extraordinary opposition there was in this country to the idea of votes for women before the war, and the more extraordinary means to which women in earnest were driven in order to claim equal political rights with men. We, of the Labour Movement have some satisfaction in remembering that we have stood all along for full and equal political rights for men and women alike. The women in our mining districts have contributed their share towards the building up of the Labour vote since the franchise was first given to women in 1918, and now the younger women are to be included in the voters' lists we can rest certain that the Labour position will be strengthened in the constituencies and very soon in Parliament as well.

Some of our people seem to think that Parliament is a played-out institution, and that other countries have something to teach us in the matter of law making. Nobody pretends that our House of Lords and our House of Commons are at present ideal machines for improving the conditions of the people, but we all know that now the power of the franchise is possessed by the overwhelming masses of the working people they have in their own hands the means by which they can make Parliament a much more effective instrument for securing social justice. It remains as true to-day as ever it did that it is little use we miners organising and fighting for decent conditions of employment in the lodge room and in the negotiating Chambers if we leave the power of Parliament to be used by those against whom we are organising and fighting. It would be just as little use for our wives and daughters to pinch and scrape in their kitchens to make the little wage of their men folk stretch out from one week-end to another, or to join our co-operative societies in order to make our pennies go further in the spending, if they too

remained content to let people with other views, with other kinds of experience, and without any knowledge or feeling about the daily struggle of working-class life, form Governments and dominate Parliaments to their own benefit and to our detriment.

God knows the experience of the miners during the last few years, added to that of the other great industries of the country, should impress on every working man and woman the need for the political self-reliance of Labour. The textile workers seem to be continually condemned to short-time and repeated attempts to depress their conditions. The engineers' and ship-building trades are broken with unemployment and low wages rates, and the iron and steel industries are also uncertain regarding their return to any measure of real prosperity. Coal, cotton, iron, steel—these were the great elements upon which the industrial strength of Britain rested in the years gone by. All of them now appear to be the very victims of their previous triumphs.

For nearly four years we have suffered a Government and a Parliament that have failed utterly to appreciate the injustices by which we have all been afflicted. Next year, at latest, they come up for judgment. What are we, as miners, to do between now and the General Election? What shall we do when the opportunity comes for us to help in sending a Labour majority to Westminster? Within a few months we shall be meeting with our comrades in other trades and sections of the movement to consider the Labour Party's Programme for the Election. It seems likely that we shall find ourselves supporting a policy that will clearly mark ourselves off from the other political parties by very definite principles. There is no chance of anyone mistaking where the Labour Party stands. What our old leader, Keir Hardie, said many years ago regarding the Independent Labour Party is true to-day of the larger movement:—

“Membership of the Party is open, on equal terms to men and women of all ranks and conditions of life who accept Socialism, and who are prepared to cut themselves adrift from the orthodox political parties. No others need apply. There is no room in the Party for the superior person who wants to play the part of autocrat.”

There is no question to-day that the Labour Movement stands straight for Socialism, and for as much of it in our time—my lifetime and your lifetime—as ever we can possibly and practicably bring to pass. We want a new system of society—nothing less than that. We want every possible step to be taken day by day—in our Unions, in our Co-operative societies, in our Local Authorities, in our Government institutions—every possible step to be taken in the direction of assuring to everybody the greatest common measure of good that civilised life can provide. We want to prove that civilisation true, by seeing that everybody fit to work shall work, and that everyone enjoying the necessities, the decencies, the comforts and luxuries of life shall do their share in the effort by which alone they are provided. That may seem a long way ahead, but it is just as far ahead as the united efforts of our people like to make it.

If I may quote Keir Hardie again, I would suggest that those words which he wrote so many years ago still remain fundamentally true and are receiving a wider acceptance by all sorts and conditions of people than he thought would be possible when he died:—

“The poverty of the worker, the business of the middle and the wealth of the upper classes, are but different forms of bondage. Socialism has its message of freedom for all three. To the worker it offers release

from the bondage of thankless toil and harassing poverty; to the business man it promises freedom from the tyranny of the market, and to the rich it holds out the hope of joy in a life of useful service in exchange for an empty, idle existence."

I have a shrewd notion that the very commonsense, as well as what is called idealism of our main propositions will appeal so vividly to the younger folk coming in thousands from our secondary schools these days, fresh with a better education than we ever had hoped for, with imagination stirred by the miracles and inventions that science is showering upon us all, that they will set about the elementary task of national housekeeping with braver and lighter hearts than we have ever had, and probably they will make a quicker and better job of it than some of us have ever dreamed of.

It is clear, any way, that the next election is going to give our young men and women the biggest chance they have ever had in all our history as a nation. We have witnessed the devouring of a generation of the world's young men by unholy war, and I believe we will see something very like a resurrection of youth and the inspiration of our national life by a new and more hopeful, more enthusiastic, more adventurous generation.

We older men and our older women have done our share—may be in a blundering, stumbling sort of way—but we have fought fair, and have generally remembered we were making passages for younger feet to tread, opportunities for younger hands to hold. The time has now come for us specially to aid these young folk to take hold of the world we have helped to make and breathe new life into it, and give a new spirit to us all.

Nothing was more striking during the months of our great struggle two years ago than the magnificent response that our appeal received from the women—not only in our own Labour movement, but I think it is true to say also from the many thousands outside it. When our people from the mining districts were able to tell folk in the towns and cities up and down the country of the kind of life that is lived in our mining villages, the risks our people ran, the deaths they died, the great courage that mining has always inspired in a man, we were heard gladly. In many instances we were like visitors from another country, for in many of our national centres, particularly in the South and West, the coal fields are almost like foreign territories. To-day, I feel quite sure that the effect that was created then has not passed away, but I also feel convinced that we as miners, must take some share in the propaganda work in the districts outside our own mining areas.

As I have said before, the mining constituencies are pretty solid for the Labour Party. We have been at the job of Labour representation longer than any other section of the movement, and as we are not likely to get the successes we are working for until more seats have been won by the Party in the rural districts, and particularly in the South—we must do what we can to assist the weaker constituencies to come up to the level of our success in our own particular districts.

There was a time when colliers with their whippets were looked upon and written about in the newspapers as though they were only half-civilised. Now nearly the whole nation has gone much madder than ever we were over whippet-racing. And the worst feature of this latest craze is the influence it is having on our young people. There need be little surprise at that, for when Governments are allowed to turn thousands of lads and lasses out of their schools at 14, before their education in the best sense is completed, and no effort is made to train them to use their hands or their brains during the more important years of their youth, it is likely that any new excitement, any new

distraction will call them, and the longer they suffer national neglect the surer will they be exploited by the baser gambling instincts of the day.

I think it is up to us of the older generation—maybe the miners in particular—to get in among these young people and try to make them understand what we have been trying to do in our own Trade Unions, the struggles in which we and those who went before us engaged to get them the vote and to better their conditions, the reasons for our great Co-operative movement and the great fight that led to Labour establishing its own Party in Parliament. These are all old stories to many of us, but I believe they are new and fascinating and inspiring to the new generation. In our lifetime we have seen an enormous advance in the strength of our Movement, both industrially and politically. No longer are we isolated voices raised from soap-boxes among unfriendly crowds. The achievements for which we have laboured now give us the power to carry our message in every corner of the land, and multitudes now listen to us that not very long ago would have paid us no attention.

We are making solid progress in every direction. By steady thinking, by devotion to sane principles, by a genuine and sane unity of heart and mind and purpose we shall bring our Federation clear of all its many difficulties and help to establish the wider movement on broad and solid foundations. If we join hands in this great work, as the years go by the workers of the whole country will have reason to be proud of our efforts, and will rejoice with us in the victories that shall surely come to our great Cause.

If you wish to accomplish what is portrayed here, we have to face the position which the present Government has placed us in under the Trades Disputes and Trade Union Act, which is an attempt to cripple our political aspirations. Whilst this federation in some areas has done exceedingly well in the numbers contracted-in, other areas need to awaken to the importance of contracting-in. We may be in a position to contest the next election in such a manner as will enable us to return a majority to Parliament to govern our destinies. This can only be achieved by every unit of the Miners' Federation being active and determined to carry out the task set us by our predecessors in the industrial and political world. If ever there was a period in our history when we should stand four-square it is now. Toiling on, and step by step getting nearer and nearer to the day when we shall have accomplished what the pioneers of this movement set out for and which was the ideal of their life's work, namely, the emancipation of the worker.

OBITUARIES.

It is one of the duties of the chairman to make passing reference to matters and events which have happened since the last annual conference, and the one which causes a feeling of sadness to steal over one is the continual recurrence of having to pay homage to friends and colleagues who have passed away during the intervening period. Little did I think when I uttered these words at Southport:—

“I don't see many of the old pioneers in this movement here, although I hope before this week is out to see the Right Hon. Thos. Ashton down here. He was one of the pioneers,”

that that conference was the last he would attend. No words of mine can do justice to the memory and worth of Tom Ashton. He was the first secretary of this federation, which office he relinquished a few years ago owing to advancing years. He always tried to serve both this Federation and the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation to the utmost of his capacity.

It was his life's work, and his name is revered throughout the whole of Great Britain, and amongst the nationalities affiliated to the Miners' International, under which organisation he had various official positions.

In addition we have to mourn the loss of our colleagues, Mr. Frank Hall, of Derbyshire; and Mr. W. K. Smith, of South Derbyshire, who worked along with us as members of the Executive. Also Mr. J. Martin, of Durham, and Mr. W. Hopkins, of South Wales. These are comrades who all played their part in our movement to bring about the emancipation of the workers.