
PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

Rt. Hon. T. RICHARDS : The next you will see is the President's Address.

GENTLEMEN,—You will all be quite familiar with the proceedings at the Special Conference at which I was suddenly and unexpectedly requested to undertake the duties of President pending this Conference.

We were in a crisis that necessitated very momentous decisions without delay, and because of that, and for no other reason, I accepted the responsibility of the office of President, when, with the other officials, the Committee, and Conference, I recommended to our members what we thought was the proper

course to pursue in dealing with the serious situation that had arisen consequent upon our negotiations with the Government relating to proposals for legislation on the hours question.

These are the circumstances which were the origin of my having to address you in this capacity to-day. I want to tender the Secretary and Treasurer, and every member of the Committee, my very sincere thanks for the full loyalty and support given me during what I think has been a period as important as many of the anxious periods in the history of the Federation.

While the ultimate results are fraught with immense possibilities for good or ill largely dependent upon the degree of goodwill and co-operation exercised in their application.

This year, as in all the years of our existence, we are not spared the melancholy, sorrowful task of referring to the death roll as the result of colliery explosions.

The Milfraen and Wernbwl disasters in South Wales, the Wath Main and Allerton in Yorkshire, and the Empire Colliery in Lancashire, all resulting in a serious loss of life and the attendant suffering among our people, to all of whom we tender our heartfelt sympathy.

I am sure you would also want me to say in your name how deeply we sympathise with the German families and the German miners in their great affliction by the explosion in Silicia.

We feel indebted to several people who have been devoting considerable time and money in seeking to invent mechanical devices for the detection of firedamp and giving warnings to the miners of its presence ; and we regret that the Mines Department and Inspectorate has not offered more encouragement to these inventors, and also seriously taken into consideration the compulsory use of what appears to us practical means for mitigating the dangers and loss of life from explosions.

While conscious of the research work that is taking place, I am beginning to despair that we do not appear to have made much progress in the prevention of explosions by the continuous experiments relating to its vagaries during its progress after the ignition, and am more and more convinced that there is one keyword to the solution of this problem—that word is Ventilation.

The Mines Act stipulates that there should be adequate ventilation provided in every mine, but I am satisfied that in a large number of mines in which adequate ventilation is found upon the roadways at the measurement points, it is far from adequate at the coal face, where the explosive mixture is being manufactured.

The tendency of present-day methods of machine-production and conveyors renders it imperative upon us to call the attention of the Mines Department and Inspectorate, and ask that they shall insist that this adequate ventilation shall be carried to the face of the coal, the first place necessary to prevent gas accumulations and explosions.

The country is generally familiar with the death roll from colliery explosions, and we gratefully acknowledge the ready response usually made to appeals on behalf of the suffering dependants.

But the regular day-by-day loss of life and serious injury to men employed in the mines appear to be accepted as inevitable to the calling.

A man is killed in the mine, and a four line report in the local newspaper recording the event is the end of the story, other than at the end of every year the industrial statistics show much the same figures as those for 1929—1,076 killed, over 160,000 injured and incapacitated for more than three days. While

to 4,228 there is applied the term "seriously injured," but it is only those familiar with mining life who have any conception of the suffering and poverty portrayed by that description.

COMPENSATION.

Adequate compensation for those injured workmen has again this year occupied a large measure of attention by your Committee. We have joined with the General Council in urging upon the Government the consideration of the Compensation Bill adopted by the Trades Union Congress last year, which comprehensively deals both with the amount of compensation payable and the rectification of many devices by which injured workmen have been deprived of the compensation to which they were justly entitled. This Conference will again call upon the Government to pass this Bill.

I had hoped that the Government would, without waiting for this Bill, make it compulsory upon the 12½ per cent. of colliery undertakings which are not insured for compensation risks to do so, their attention having been called to the fact that hundreds of workmen permanently injured have been deprived of their compensation upon the failure of uninsured colliery concerns.

WORKMEN CERTIFIED FIT FOR LIGHT WORK.

This is another phase of this question which has become an increasing source of hardship to our people during recent years. If an injured workman, in receipt of compensation, is certified as fit for light work, then it should be an obligation on the employer either to provide him with that work or continue to pay him compensation in full.

At present an employer may reduce the compensation, and is under no obligation to provide the workmen with suitable employment. The compensation may be finally extinguished, and the employer is then under no further responsibility either to pay compensation or to provide work, and in the present state of the labour market it becomes impossible for the workman himself to obtain employment. Nevertheless, the failure of the workman to earn wages is clearly due to the accident he sustained while following his employment ; but for that accident he would be earning full wages.

The present position of the law falls with peculiar hardship on those of our men who have the misfortune to contract Nystagmus. It is becoming more and more difficult for workmen so inflicted to obtain suitable employment, so that they have to bear the double burden of the disease itself and total unemployment. The Federation has for many years sought to remedy this intolerable position, and during the current year I observed with pleasure the efforts made in the House of Commons by our mining Members. We must continue our efforts in this serious matter until success is achieved.

SILICOSIS AND ANTHROCOSIS.

You will observe from the Report of the Executive Committee the steps which have been taken by the Federation last year to remove the objectionable features of the various Industries (Silicosis) Scheme, 1928, and to ensure that compensation shall be paid to all persons who contract this disease when working in coal mines.

There is reason to believe that in response to our appeals the Government will now take steps to remove the 50 per cent. clause and also the other disabling features which rendered the scheme worthless to our own people.

I feel, however, that when this has been done, we shall still require to press for the most careful research not only into the incidence and circumstances

of this and kindred diseases, but also into the effects of stone dusting and coal dust generally. Medical knowledge of diseases arising from these operations is not, at present, in an advanced stage, and I trust that our people in the districts will continue to co-operate with us in obtaining evidence which we can place at the disposal of Sir Thomas Legge, M.D., with a view to utilising his expert services for the common benefit of our membership.

I regard the appointment of Sir Thomas by the General Council as Medical Consultant to the Trade Union Movement as a highly desirable procedure. Sir Thomas has already rendered us great assistance by his personal investigations relating to silicosis, and at our request he is now—in conjunction with Sir Thomas Oliver, M.D.—turning his attention to the peculiar diseases to which cokemen and by-product workers are liable, with a view to getting them scheduled as industrial diseases under the Workmen's Compensation Act. The districts will be familiar with the recent valuable report made by Sir Thomas Oliver on these subjects. This report was the result of a prolonged investigation undertaken at the request and expense of our constituent organisation, the National Union of Cokemen, and I believe that the result will be of great value to our coke and by-product members.

COAL MINES BILL.

As you are fully aware, the resources of the Federation during the year have been very much occupied with the efforts of the Government to pass this Bill.

Having reluctantly relinquished our claim for an immediate return to the seven hour working day, and by your instruction accepted the plan outlined by the Government for a seven and a-half hour day, with the various proposals for the reorganisation of the industry, your Committee, together with your Federation Members of Parliament, kept constantly in touch with the Government during the chequered career of the Bill through the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

As we anticipated, the Tory Party, who at the instance of the coalowners, had increased the hours of work from seven to eight, strenuously opposed the Bill, and failing its defeat resorted to all manner of devices to render it non-effective.

But we did not anticipate that the Liberal Party, like the coalowners, would harass the Government to the extent they did, although from different angles. They refused to believe that the Miners' Federation could in any degree desire that the mining industry should be operated in a manner not only beneficial to the miners, but to all concerned in the industry, or that we could possibly be anxious to relieve the country from the continuance of the recurring strife of recent years, with their disastrous results. On the one hand we were charged with collusion with the owners to fleece the country, while on the other we desired to ruin the country and the coalowners.

I am glad we had among our mining Members in the House of Commons those who were able not only to refute those charges but also to voice our real aspirations and motives that the industry should be placed on a basis that would enable it to restore to us our seven hours working day, and what is generally admitted by all classes in this country as urgently necessary, some measure of improvement in the miserably low standard of life under which the mining population exists.

While we were able to command this advocacy of our cause in the House of Commons, a correspondent to the "Evening Standard," who, I believe,

is a "die-hard" Tory, made it a matter of boast that we were voiceless and unable to secure this in the House of Lords, by stating :—

"On this, not the least important side of the coal trade, the House of Lords is stronger than the House of Commons, since nearly all the big coalowners and chairmen of colliery companies are peers; cotton and coal being the humble elements out of which have risen about half the House of Lords."

"There you have it plain and pat," ye producers of coal and manufacturers of cotton; put it in your journals, cite it in your speeches that your members may realise the dignity of their labour, that while they are producing the "humble elements" of coal and cotton they are also creating peers of the realm. Having fully grasped this fact they may be able to appreciate the point of view of their employer who may be feeling he has a place in the apostolic succession to this great chamber, and is consequently innocently serious in stating to his workmen: "Your Trades Union is all right, but why bother with politics? Leave that to us."

I want to thank our proved friend, Lord Chancellor Justice Sankey, for his exclamation: "Oh, that we were there to speak for ourselves."

Now, gentlemen, this speech would become inordinately long if I attempted to deal further with the course of the Bill that has now become law. Suffice it to state that there were times when your Committee and mining Members were on the point of revolt against the intriguing to prevent the Government passing this Bill.

That it eventually passed is very largely due to the patient statesmanship of the President of the Board of Trade, Mr. W. Graham, who, strong in his conviction that in this way was to be found the means, not only of a measure of justice to the miners, but the restoration of prosperity to the industry, never gave up hope of ultimate success.

Many of his ideals and ours were sacrificed in the process, with the result that the Act bears indelibly the imprint of the fact that it was secured by a Labour Minority Government.

A word of explanation is necessary upon the last phase of the controversy with the House of Lords who had insisted upon the insertion of a provision for legalising a weekly or fortnightly spread-over of the permitted hours in this Bill. The Commons, having twice rejected this amendment, it was again sent back by the House of Lords.

This placed the Government in the position of having to accept the amendment in some form, or sacrifice the whole of the Bill. This position was explained to your Committee by Mr. Graham at a meeting of the mining Members of Parliament, at the same time intimating that the Government were reluctant to lose what they considered the very important machinery, and the reduction of hours provided by the Bill—the only course open if they did not accept the amendment.

They therefore suggested that the amendment could be accepted with the proviso that any district scheme agreed upon by the employers and workmen should be made subject to the approval of the Mining Association of Great Britain and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.

Before arriving at a decision, they desired to have before them the views of the Federation. We pressed for time to call a Conference, but the Government stated this to be impossible, consequent upon the limited time at their disposal. Your Committee thereupon decided to inform the Government that while they strongly resented the action of the House of Lords, they felt they

could not resist the suggestion that the Government had made, that the amendment be accepted with the proviso that all schemes should be subject to the approval of the national organisations of employers and workmen.

There are, in addition to this amendment, many weak features in this legislation, but despite those, if the coalowners of this country have more faith in the possibilities of their own industry, and display half the energy and unity they have exercised in pressing their views upon the Government during the progress of this Bill, in putting the machinery afforded them into operation, an all round improvement in the industry is possible.

We hear a great deal in these days that the people of this country are suffering from a disease they describe as an inferiority complex; there is no necessity for this in the mining industry. Despite our own troubles we are still a great industry in which nearly 1,000,000 workmen are employed. We produced last quarter at the rate of 239,830,396 tons per annum. We exported at the rate of 75,451,252 tons per annum.

We are the foundation of the great industries of this country, whose employees are better paid, have more regular employment, and are free from the many hardships and dangers peculiar to mining. All the workmen in these industries are with us in our claim for better conditions, the people generally in this country are with us when we protest against a wage of 6s. to 8s. a day for hundreds of thousands of men in the mines.

It is also admitted by all right-thinking people that if the workpeople engaged on the surface are to have a maximum of eight hours per day as prescribed by the Washington Convention, underground workmen are not unreasonable when they insist upon the return to the seven hours' day.

I am, therefore, going to urge upon the coalowners to believe the fact that the people of this country are prepared to pay the economic price necessary to provide the miners with a decent standard of life, rather than continue as they have done through their spokesmen in Parliament and their mouthpieces in the Geneva Conferences, warn the people at home and the coal consumers abroad that "their coal will cost them more." That the sellers of coal should be continuously doing this is to me inexplicable.

We have not been given much place or voice in the machinery for the operation of this Act of Parliament, but we shall anxiously watch and hope to see that every effort possible is made by those who have the responsibility to obtain the goodwill and co-operation that will ensure success.

The justification for this legislation is to be found in the totally unsatisfactory results of the mining industry in the last three years.

In 1926, under the pressure of the coalowners and their persistent declarations that an increase in the hours of work of the miners were the only means available for restoring prosperity to the industry, the Tory Government enforced upon the majority of the miners an increase of one hour a day, from seven to eight, in the working hours.

When work was resumed under these conditions, the employers were not content with the increased hour in the working time, but also enforced an enormous reduction in wages at the same time, with regular further reductions, some of them flagrant breaches of joint agreements and well-established customs.

Their intimations to the Government have been entirely falsified, the unjustifiable hardships and poverty inflicted upon the mineworkers and their families have not restored prosperity to the industry.

The enormity of their impositions upon the workmen can be seen in the following facts :—

During the three years, 1927, 1928, and 1929, the output of coal per man has been increased at the rate of 40 tons per annum per man employed, and for the three years an average rate of increase of 13,000,000 tons per annum.

The total cost of production have been reduced by 4s. 5d. per ton, of this the reduction in wages amounted to 3s. 8½d. per ton.

It is a significant fact that apart from wages, all other costs represent a reduction of only 8½d. per ton.

While the workmen have been suffering these reductions in wages and supplying this great increase in their production of coal, the advantage to the industry has been recklessly dissipated by the competition of the coalowners with each other, resulting in a reduction in the selling price of coal of over 3s. per ton.

Longer hours and reduced wages have failed in this instance as they have all through industrial history to command prosperity, but I believe that given the genius of sincere co-operation in the operation of the machinery for the conduct of the industry now at their disposal, a great measure of success can be obtained.

UNEMPLOYMENT.

This continues a great infliction upon the members of our organisation, forming a great part of the appalling increase in the number of people in this country for whom no employment is available. The figures for June last show that there were 143,397 totally unemployed and 112,310 partially, indicating 250,000 unemployed.

These unemployed workmen, despite the amendment of the Unemployed Insurance Act altering the basis of the "Not Genuinely Seeking Work" obligation, are still subjected to many harassing stipulations that, without the defence afforded them by the officials of their organisation, would deprive them of their Unemployment Pay.

The defence of the unemployed miner has occupied more of the time of the officials of the Federation for many years than any other part of their duties.

It is difficult to imagine, much less calculate, the number of workmen who would have been deprived of their benefit by the inquisitorial officials, the Court of Referees, or the Umpire, if they had been left undefended by the representatives of their organisation.

I am afraid that there is little hope that there will be any material increase in the opportunity for employment (at least, in the immediate future) in our own industry; hence it is incumbent upon us to render what service we can in finding a national solution for this enormous economic problem. That it is a world problem provides no excuse for refusing to use all the national resources available for its mitigation and ultimate solution.

It unfortunately has become a source of an irritating and damaging controversy in our own circles, both in and outside Parliament, as to whether the Government are not lacking in courage and imagination in simply adopting the small schemes of "Economic Work," which at best can be but temporary palliatives for what appears to be the devastation of a rapidly increasing chronic disease.

As we have a strong representation of our industry in Parliament, I would, while pressing the necessity of the case, urge that our only hope for the future is in unity in our own ranks.

I feel that I must call your attention to one of the policies that is looming largely in present-day political controversy, which is put forth as offering a solution to all our economic and unemployment difficulties, viz.,

EMPIRE FREE TRADE.

The policy of rationalisation is common to all three political parties ; it may be very necessary, but there is something soul-less and unattractive about it, and I do not believe it will ever be popular with our people. Much more attractive would be a policy which would give us assured markets for our goods, and eliminate the ruthless competitive struggle of to-day.

It is stated by Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere, who claim they have a large support in the country, that their policy would achieve all that we want.

Now, while we have our own political views and allegiances, as a Miners' Federation we are always prepared to give close attention to proposals which may help our own people, and we do this irrespective of the quarter from which such proposals may come. To us, as an organisation, the sole test of any policy is its effect upon the miners and the mining industry.

As a matter of fact, the papers controlled by Lord Beaverbrook have in the past appeared to have taken a very keen interest in the coal industry, and have advocated a policy of trustification of the whole industry, which, in its essentials, is identical with the policy of the Miners' Federation. The difference between us is that while we regard it as essential that such a policy shall be operated under public ownership, Lord Beaverbrook thinks it should be operated under private ownership. Apart from this difference, Lord Beaverbrook has very strongly endorsed our own views upon the coalmining industry.

When, however, we examine the proposals for " Empire Free Trade " in the light of their effect upon our particular industry, and to miners, it is natural to think in terms of coal—then I am afraid it will be impossible for us to enthuse over them. Putting aside the question as to whether this policy is a practical policy or not, it must be confessed that all the evidence tends to show that the attitude of the Dominions does not consider it possible.

Let us examine it in the light of the broad facts which surround the coal mining industry in this country. The exports of coal to countries within the British Empire form a tiny proportion of the total exports, normally rather less than 2 per cent. The only market of any size is the Canadian market, and even this is insignificant in relation to the whole. The overwhelming proportion of British coal exports are sent to European countries, and more particularly to the West European block of countries.

The chief single importer of British coal now, as always, is France, and next in importance come Italy, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries and the Argentine Republic. Canada is the only country within the British Empire which imports coal in any considerable quantity, but even her imports of British coal are negligible by comparison with the countries quoted above. In Canada, the United States of America finds the chief customer for her surplus coal, and with all the advantages possessed by America, geographical and otherwise, it is inconceivable that this country can wrest any considerable portion of this trade from her.

Lord Beaverbrook's policy, therefore, cannot directly help the export coal trade ; but can it be imagined that this policy, involving as it does discrimination between countries of the British Empire and countries outside the British Empire, will not have the most serious reactions in those countries who are now are chief customers for coal, and upon whom we must always

depend. In my view, such a reaction would be inevitable, and we should find that the difficulties of our export trade would be increased a hundredfold. It is a policy which would have the most serious effects upon the mineworkers in our export districts, large numbers of whom would find themselves without employment, with the cost of foodstuffs at exorbitant figures.

In stating this, I don't think I come within what Churchill in his metamorphosis state described Free Traders as "Victorian Dodos." But even at the risk of coming within that choice description, I want to warn our people that whether it be called "Empire Free Trade," "Beaverbrook," or "Baldwin," it is "the Old Horse Protection"—shingled and shorn of tariffs, low wages, unemployment, and impossible food prices.

I offer no objection to the General Council investigating the possibilities of our industrial and economic relations with the Dominions and Colonies that will enable our people to form their judgment upon any scheme for a mutual exchange of commodities independent of tariffs—protective or retaliatory.

Gentlemen, I have endeavoured to offer a few observations, not so much as conclusions, but to attract your attention and, I hope, your serious consideration to what at the moment are some of the industrial and political issues of enormous gravity to our people.

There are other numerous phases of mining life you will deliberate upon during the sittings of the Conference.

May I hope that in all our deliberations and discussions, even our differences, that we shall remember that we are the deputies of a great mass of people, who, having reposed their trust in us, are entitled to command that all our energies shall be devoted to rendering them honest and sincere guidance in their struggles for better conditions of employment that will afford them the higher standard of life to which they are justly entitled.