

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

FELLOW DELEGATES,

Since our last Annual Conference the Federation has lost several leaders. Last year we had a record of the passing of seven, and to-day we have to mourn

the loss of H. Hughes, of North Wales; W. Latham, Midland Federation; Watts Morgan, M.P., South Wales; T. Trotter, Durham; and Fred Hall, M.P., Yorkshire.

Father Time is never unemployed and often takes youth with old age, and some are called who appeared to have before them many years of service. The friends we miss to-day had rendered great service to the miners of Britain, for which I hope they will long be remembered. I trust also that the influence of their lives and labour will bear fruit with our young members in such a manner that this great Federation will always find within its ranks men ever ready to carry on the work of improving both industrially and socially the lot in life of their fellow miners. For each year reminds us of the hardships and dangers they undergo, not only as a result of those terrible explosions and other accidents, of which we record nine since July, 1932, with a loss of 83 lives, but also the loss of life and serious injury that occurs every working day at our mines, bringing sorrow and sadness into our mining village life. The general public can never truly understand the cost to human life of the winning of coal. We, their comrades, are better able to do so; and in respect and kind remembrance of all let us in silence stand.

We have not yet succeeded in the establishment of a National Wages Board. The mineowners have refused to deal with the question and the Government has evaded it, while many newspapers have not put before the public a true outline of what we seek, some having made very misleading statements. We may, therefore, have to reach the people by public meetings. One leading colliery journal has said that my reply to Mr. Evan Williams was foolish talk, and then goes on to misrepresent what I did say and what our aim is. The writer states:—

“What the Federation’s demand amounts to is that every trivial dispute on field rates or allowances should be haled before a National Board, with the further inference that the Government might be forced to ensure awards that would be acceptable to the men. The ‘Man-in-the-Street’ may be left to judge whether such designs are calculated to promote peace or prosperity in the industry.”

Other papers have followed on similar lines; but when the Editor of a trade journal undertakes to deal with so important a question we at least expect greater care. For it is not only wrong to mislead and delude the general public, but it may have very serious effect on the relations of employed and employers. Therefore, I propose to set out here what I said last year and on June 1 this year on this question:—

July, 1932.

“For the present then we have this ‘gentlemen’s agreement,’ but what is going to take its place at the end of twelve months, which will soon pass away? How will the miners’ case then stand if there are only district negotiations and none of a national character? Shall the old method still operate—one district being reduced in wages, and then the mineowners of another district saying they must get down their cost per ton to enable them to keep their trade? Unfortunately, the lessons of the past are often forgotten. There are large numbers of people at the present time who believe that stoppages and trouble only came about in the coal trade with agreements and negotiations conducted on a national basis. Nothing can be further from the truth; and, to prove this, let me set out some of the stoppages that took place in the mining industry between the years 1879 to 1898, while only district settlements were in operation:—

								<i>Weeks</i>
1879	..	Durham	..	..	..	..	..	6
1881-2	..	Lancashire	..	..	..	..	..	7
1885	..	Yorkshire	..	..	..	..	..	9
1887	..	Northumberland	..	..	..	..	..	17
1890	..	Yorkshire, Lancashire and Midlands	..	..	..	..	..	9
1892	..	Durham	..	..	..	..	..	13
1893	..	Federated District	..	..	..	..	..	16
1894	..	Scotland	..	..	..	..	..	16
1898	..	South Wales and Monmouth	..	..	..	..	..	22
								—
								115
								—

"We find in this record that in a period of less than 19 years there was experienced two years and 11 weeks' idle time for the miners. In nearly every case the cause was a claim for a reduction of wages; and we also find that never once during those years was there a period of more than four years when the whole of the British coalfield was at work. Since those days great changes have been experienced in the industrial life of Britain, and I may say in the world at large also. The tendency of the age is towards a stronger national control and co-operation in all the large industries of the nation for the purpose of production and distribution. It has been established by law on the railways, and at the present time national co-operation is being sought in the iron and steel trades."

June, 1933.

"There are two things before you, and you must keep those two things constantly before you. Can we establish a national method of regulating wages through the mineowners or the Government? That is number one. Number two: Have we to allow a district—no one knows who it will be first to stand to be attacked by the mineowners, defeated, and then another district attacked? That is number two.

"These are questions for this Conference to consider. Questions for our men in the coalfields to consider. I may not be long your President, but so long as I retain this position—I say it in all seriousness—I shall never accept the principle of the old method of district agreements—district attack. I stand for a national method. If other organisations can obtain it, as they are, we, as miners, which I will say is the principal industry of this nation, should also have the same method of regulating wages. Instead of strife, it is the way to peace if the Government and the mineowners will accept it. Their method, as I said before, will inevitably lead to strife if it continues."

Now, let me outline a sample of the results of district settlements, which I hope will make the matter clear.

I set out below figures dealing with a large county. I am showing the number of persons employed since 1926, the number of days worked per week, and average weekly wage. But we must remember in dealing with the average weekly wage that almost one-third of these people have only the subsistence wage of less than 7s. per day. I have also shown the average selling price each year and output per man-shift worked.

FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

Excess of Receipts over Expenditure

						£
1929-30	..	..	..	..	..	4,304,293
1930-31	..	..	..	..	..	4,247,584
1931-32	..	..	..	..	..	4,040,803

For electricity, public authorities show a gross profit as follows:—

						£
1929-30	..	..	..	..	..	15,538,862
1930-31	..	..	..	..	..	15,360,093

ELECTRICITY COMPANIES' GROSS PROFITS were:—

						£
1929 ..	..	..	..	..	..	12,158,128
1930 ..	..	..	..	..	..	12,283,291

I do not complain about the prosperity of the gas and electricity undertakings, but I do object to people saying that they must have cheap coal when the total gross profits from the whole national coal mines during those same years would amount to less than one-eighth of the gross profits from those industries; and although it may be true, as we find in other industries, that coalowners may also be owners of gas works and electricity generators, and that, as the old saying goes, "what they lose on the swings they make up on the roundabouts," this does not apply to the miners; and we claim that the produce of our labour should be able to supply us with a just and decent standard of life; but we know too well that under the present method of control in production and distribution this is not forthcoming.

The present state of the coal trade also calls for closer co-operation on the question concisely put in the phrase "back to coal," and also on our export trade. In 1913, the annual average consumption of coal per head of the population in Britain was 89 cwt., while in 1930, it had fallen to 75 cwt. Fifty years ago, Britain produced 45 per cent. of the world's output of coal. To-day, if we include lignite, we produce less than 18 per cent. From 1929 to 1932, our yearly output of coal went down by 48,662,402 tons, and the number of persons employed was reduced by 159,489. Our export trade has decreased by 21,367,128, or 35 per cent.; and there can be no doubt that the action of the British Government in building up tariff walls has caused our coal trade to suffer. Other nations, finding the change in our British trade policy was against them, at once retaliated and endeavoured to check its operation and its results. Now, as coal was a large factor in our export, it was in their power to reduce their imports of same; and while trade agreements may and should help to increase our coal export, they have not done so, nor can we expect by that method alone to regain what has been lost in our foreign trade.

WELFARE FUND

We have now had the Report of the Departmental Committee on Welfare, whose recommendations, if embodied in law, would change the whole method of management and the amount of the levy. The Government have already announced their intention to reduce the levy to one half-penny, but I hope they will reconsider the question and allow the old figure to remain, for there is no penny of the produce of coal which has done such great service to mining life: and there are yet many useful ways in which part of it could be utilised to

brighten and benefit in every way the otherwise drab lives of the miners and their families. We must all use what influence we have with Members of Parliament so as to secure the retention of this penny levy; and we must also use our influence to prevent any change in the management, which will in any way make less effective the District Management now in operation, nor should the districts receive a less percentage of the fund than that now allocated to them. In my opinion, the Central Welfare Committee also possesses sufficient control. I stand for more district power in administration, as naturally they better understand the needs of the people and how best to meet them.

INTERNATIONAL MINERS' FEDERATION

I am sorry to state that our Miners' International, like many other useful organisations, is suffering from the influence and power of the present German Government. We were informed at the International Committee held recently that our German comrades would not attend; and I am afraid that for some time to come they will be unable to associate with us as an organisation, but we who have the power to do so must keep alive that organisation. It is the only channel through which the miners of the world can come together in goodwill and fellowship, compare notes on the difficulties and troubles that are common to all in mining life of all nations, and by co-operation endeavour to improve the miners' wages, hours and conditions. For the present we shall miss our German friends, but it will only be for a period. Dictatorship may only be of short duration in the life of a nation, where the right to vote by the people has once been established, because deep in the human heart there is a craving for justice, and a share as a citizen in the rule of the nation, which, when once enjoyed, lives on; and when the opportunity arrives, the false must go down and the truth arise. Yet, I hope the working people of this country will learn from the last Election and what this Government has done, and also from what has taken place in other countries during the last few years, that it requires less power and energy, and is better for the people, to keep their liberty when once secured, than regain it when it is lost.

OUR COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS

I am pleased with the splendid spirit of co-operation manifested by our Committee during the last 12 months. We have held many meetings, and the action of the mineowners and the Government has called forth various points of view, and different opinions have been expressed as to what was the right course to pursue. Yet, amidst all, true loyalty has been displayed to our Federation and to each other. No information has been conveyed to the Press, beyond what has been officially given by the Secretary; and in a time of difficulty, such as we have been passing through, this is very important, as it establishes a feeling of confidence and trust, which enables everyone to offer what they believe is best for our movement, with helpful results. I must also thank you, and through you the members of the Federation, for the trust and confidence placed in us when we held Conferences in March and June. We have been unable to show any great success as the outcome of these Conferences; but I feel sure all recognise that these are times which call for greater power of endurance to maintain one's ground, than is needed at other times to make any advance. We are working in a very difficult period. With a seriously shrinking coal trade and the general condition of the world with its ever increasing millions of unemployed, leaders cannot expect and do not look for much praise. In fact, they are indeed fortunate to escape condemnation. It is, therefore, very encouraging in such times to retain the members' confidence; and when we feel that we possess this it brings out what is best in the service your Committee can render you.

THE FEDERATION AND NEED FOR UNITY

At this Conference we shall receive reports from districts on the question of re-organisation and amalgamation; and while we hope for progress, let us not be disappointed or slacken our efforts if we find the reports are not altogether satisfactory, because what the Federation is seeking to bring about will mean great change, and the general rule is that such changes often entail long negotiations by the interested parties. Therefore, we must have patience, and hope that in all meetings between District Associations each will endeavour to keep alive a true feeling of fellowship, for it is very important that national unity amongst the miners should be established and maintained. Even the Nottingham miners, when making their five years' agreement, found it necessary to insert a clause which recognised the influence one district can have on another by wage reductions. My earnest hope is that they will also soon find out the mistake of separation from us, and once again return to the Federation, so that by united effort we shall the sooner be able to bring about a vast improvement for all engaged in the industry. We must also realise in every district that it is our duty to do our utmost to enrol new members, so that we may stand once more, as in 1920, with full membership.

THE NATIONAL OUTLOOK

Since our last Conference there have been many meetings and long discussions on World Disarmament and International Co-operation, but as yet we find no real progress in the work, nor any upward movement in trade between the nations. More workers of the world are unemployed, and fear and mistrust amongst statesmen is largely responsible for that want of confidence which is so essential to the building up of world trade and commerce. It would almost appear that a babel of tongues is once again going to separate the human family, or that the common people of the world must set aside these experts, and by the application of commonsense and trust establish a confidence and peace which shall break down the high tariff barriers, and once more build up the world's trade and prosperity. Our own Government is so taken up with this international talk that they fail to recognise the importance of a national effort to undertake and find work for the people, which, besides being a Godsend to the unemployed, would in its results enrich the nation. Such work can be found if only those in power will lay aside self-interest and endeavour to attend to the national well-being and needs of the people.

In closing, let me ask that during the week we consider the questions before us in a helpful spirit, so that the result of our labours will benefit our people. There is a great deal in the action of the mineowners to make us not only discontented but resentful, and the Government during the year has not given us that consideration and assistance we should have been granted. Yet, we must remember that the greater the difficulties we have to face the greater must be our care for the interests of our people. Let us go forward, not with fear, but with a calm and sure determination that if the forces against us do compel a struggle in the coal trade, we shall, by the justice of our claim and power of our resistance, attain the end we have in view—a just and reasonable reward for labour done.