

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Mr. W. LAWThER (VICE-PRESIDENT) : It is now my pleasure to call upon Mr. Jones to deliver this, his third, Presidential Address.

Mr. J. JONES (PRESIDENT) : FELLOW DELEGATES, in some industries the risk of accident and disease is comparatively slight, but of those who work in the mining industry, death and injury always take a heavy toll, and this year we have to deplore the passing of many old friends and members who have rendered long and faithful service to the industry and to our organisation. Since we met last year, we have lost John Barker, of Cumberland, a member of our Executive Committee, Harry Whitehouse,

of Staffordshire, and many other able and devoted workers. We have also to mourn the loss of many loyal members of the Federation who, during the year, have paid the price which is so often exacted from those who work in coal mines, and more recently those who lost their lives in the disaster at the Brymbo Colliery, Staffs. I would ask you to offer your sympathy to the friends and relatives, and to pay a tribute to the memory of our old comrades in the usual way.

SAFETY IN MINES

The loss of these old members must inevitably bring to our minds the question of the health and safety of those who now labour in the industry and of those who will do so in the future. As you know, a Royal Commission is now investigating this question, and I feel confident that the public shares with us the earnest hope that the labours of the Commission will result in legislation being passed which will provide for a much higher standard of health and safety in the mines than we have to-day. We have done our best to help. We feel that our evidence to the Commission, both written and oral, faithfully reflected the views and experiences of the men in the coalfields, and we sincerely believe that the proposals we made would go a long way towards meeting the increased dangers which result from the changed mining conditions of to-day. We feel also that our proposals would go far to eliminate the weakness and omissions in the legislation which, apart from any change in mining conditions, our experience had revealed to us. But, as the Gresford Inquiry so clearly showed, the law may be as stringent, as comprehensive, and as clear as human ingenuity can devise, and yet, if it is not obeyed, will be powerless to save us from even the worst of mining disasters. Therefore, to ensure that the law is carried out is of even greater importance than to provide that it shall be clear and adequate. Here, also, the Federation has played its part. Our proposals for clarifying the legal responsibilities of owners, managers and other officials, and our suggestions for giving a better status and more freedom and independence to the deputy, were all made with this purpose in view, and were the result of our experiences in every coalfield. Our plea for more frequent and more adequate inspections was made for the same purpose, and now we can only express once again our sincere hope that the Commission will be able to help us in these vital matters by making strong and unanimous recommendations to the Government.

THE DISPUTE IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

The past twelve months have been a notable period in the history of the Federation, for since we met last year we have been able to compose the differences in the Nottinghamshire coalfield and to bring the coalfield as a whole back into the fold of the Federation after more than ten years of intense bitterness and strife between the rival factions. I want to say nothing on this subject which may rekindle the fires of old controversies, yet I feel it is possible to say something which will be helpful to all of us.

In the first place, I should like to say that in my view, those of us who have the honour of being your officials and Executive Members must necessarily acquire a greater knowledge of the strength and weakness of the organisation than those whose opportunities for gaining such knowledge are

limited, and who, for that reason, are inclined to view national problems from the circumstances of their particular districts, rather than from the circumstances of the Federation as a whole. Nevertheless, while your officials and Executive should understand the difficulties of certain districts, it is essential that they should also be able to appreciate new circumstances and new points of view, as they arise, and adapt their policy accordingly. On the other hand, when at last the difficulties of the organisation are made manifest, it becomes necessary for those who differ from the official view not to press matters to extremes, but, in their turn, to accept the realities of the situation.

In the Nottinghamshire dispute the different elements of the Federation showed a resiliency in these matters, and a patience with, and forbearance towards one another, which contributed materially to the honourable conclusion of the dispute and which should be of the greatest value in the future.

I thank all Executive colleagues for their splendid help and loyalty during those difficult negotiations and I thank the men at Harworth for their magnificent stand, without which all would have been in vain. It is a matter of deep regret that, since the dispute ended, some of our people at Harworth have been punished in a way which is wholly inconsistent with the spirit of the settlement and with the maintenance of peace and goodwill in the industry. We have taken this matter up with the Home Secretary, and we have strong hopes that the Government will appreciate our point of view.

The Notts dispute demonstrated to us once again the value of national action; it is now apparent to us all that we could never have overcome the difficulties in Nottinghamshire if we had not made the issue a matter of national concern; these recurring crises, however, are bad for the industry and bad for the miners and it is to be regretted that those who had the means and authority of effecting a settlement took no effective action until a national stoppage was imminent; a settlement was then made which, if the necessary goodwill had been shown, could have been made months earlier. I trust that, in future, when the miners of this country are making some claim to which they obviously attach the greatest importance, that claim will be speedily and effectively dealt with.

Having said this, I now freely acknowledge the accommodating and helpful spirit which was shown by the Nottinghamshire owners and the representatives of the Industrial Union during the final stages of the dispute, and I also want to pay a tribute to the present Secretary for Mines and the officials of the Mines Department. It is but justice to Captain Crookshank to say that, while he may differ from us politically, he has never allowed that difference to prejudice his consideration of any matter which we have brought before him, but on the contrary, has shown the strictest impartiality, and the keenest possible desire to secure peace on the basis of justice and goodwill. In making these remarks, I hope I shall not be misunderstood. I make them because I feel that, when we meet with consideration and fair play in high places, it is important to us that we shall freely acknowledge the fact.

FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS

And now in regard to the future of the new Union in Nottingham, I feel it would be helpful if I restated briefly the principles and sentiments which govern the policy of this organisation, and in the light thereof show how important it is that every mineworker in Nottingham should be a member of the Federation.

The mineworkers of Britain, irrespective of the district or pit in which they happen to work, are bound together by unbreakable ties of comradeship, sacrifice, and common interests. One has only to recall the hazardous nature of our calling to realise the interests we all have in common; the dangers of mining have given rise to a great body of specialised legislation in the winning and moulding of which the miners of every district have played their part, and in the future, as in the past, it is no less necessary that we shall stand together and help each other in those special tasks which the nature of our calling imposes upon us.

Our economic advancement is no less surely dependent upon the help and encouragement we give to one another. Even under the present organisation of the industry, our economic interests are firmly cemented together by our complete dependence upon each other. At the moment, the economic circumstances and possibilities of the districts may differ, but the higher wages and better conditions in the more fortunately situated districts make better wages and conditions possible in the less fortunately situated districts, while just as certainly the more fortunate districts could never sustain their position unless the others marched in line. Every district, therefore, is dependent upon other districts, and complete unity, under one organisation, is indispensable to the welfare and advancement of the whole.

As to our relationships with the employers, we too are prepared to cooperate with them for the advancement of an industry upon which we, even more than they, are dependent, and it is pleasing to know that in recent years the owners have to some extent moved nearer to the conception we hold of the proper conduct and control of the industry. But we have to recognise that on certain questions our views are bound to differ from those of the owners, and it is essential, therefore, that as an organisation we shall maintain our complete independence and freedom of action. Any other policy, indeed, would be inimical to our interests, foreign to the spirit and traditions of the miners, and would fail to win for us that respect and consideration which free men alone can command.

I feel sure that if all the men in the Notts coalfield will think about these matters they will see that by belonging to the Federation they can work with us in mutual respect and comradeship, and by so doing can help us and best help themselves to that higher and fuller life which is our common birth-right.

ORGANISATION OF THE FEDERATION

The events of the past twelve months have made the question of Federation reorganisation more urgent than ever, and it must now be clear to everyone that the form of the organisation we have to-day is in many respects out of date and a source of danger to our national unity. While we know that

in reality the interests of any district cannot be separated from those of other districts, this fact is obscured by the present form of the organisation which, by giving complete autonomy to its various units, gives rise to a tendency on the part of those units to regard all problems, even problems of national importance, from the standpoint of the supposed interests of those districts rather than from the interests of the Federation. Further, it cannot be denied that at the present time there is a certain amount of overlapping and redundancy which, by a re-arrangement of the units of the Federation, could be eliminated, with consequently a more efficient and economical service to the men at the collieries. It appears to me, therefore, that a big structural change in the form of our organisation is now necessary if the Federation is to exercise the authority and control and give that service to the members which modern conditions demand. But such a change would involve many other changes and give rise to a number of big problems which could not be successfully overcome without the assent and goodwill of all concerned. Such a change could not, in fact, be effected without the full approval of every one of the present units of the Federation. Therefore, your Executive Committee now feel that before any real progress can be made on this question it is essential that the districts shall understand the full implications of a radical change in the structure of the organisation and be prepared to carry the matter forward in the light of that knowledge.

ACHIEVEMENTS DURING THE YEAR

While a change in the form of the organisation may now be necessary, this should not lead us to under-value the immense services which the organisation is rendering to the members to-day. A glance at the report of your Executive Committee will give you a good indication of our many activities. Questions such as safety in mines, the employment of boys on the night shift, the supply of mining labour, and the application for assistance to the export trade, are but examples of the many matters which vitally affect the lives of our members and in respect of which the Federation has exerted all its influence on their behalf. Splendid efforts have also been made by districts of the Federation to build upon the success which was achieved in the wages campaign of last year. By taking advantage of the selling schemes and of the improvement in trade, many of the districts have secured further increases of wages (in some cases of a substantial character) and have also secured changes in the district agreements which will be of great benefit to the members. We congratulate the districts on this work; their achievements have been most praiseworthy, and are a striking example of what can be done by trade union organisation which, despite all its handicaps and shortcomings, is still our greatest safeguard and our most sure means of advancement.

It is encouraging to know that these efforts have been appreciated and that in consequence there has been a further increase of membership this year in many of the districts. We have still some way to go, however, before we can claim a full 100 per cent. membership IN EVERY DISTRICT, and I suggest that this is a goal for which we now strive with the utmost zeal and determination. The days ahead are fraught with great possibilities. We have still to take the FULLEST advantage of the improvement in trade and of the improvement in the organisation of the industry, and we must

not forget that when the present boom has subsided we shall need our maximum strength to safeguard our standards and to see that justice is done to those in the industry.

No less important than the gaining of new members is the necessity of educating and enthusing that small minority of members whose membership is of a nominal rather than a real character; we want all the members to take a real interest and pride in the work of the Federation; to be not merely numbers on the books, but kindred spirits, willing and active members of our great family, and valuing Trade Unionism for its own sake. If we do not do this, we shall not be able to get the best results and there is always a certain amount of danger from internal weaknesses. We would do well to recall the words of the poet:—

“That, sir, which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain,
And leave thee in the storm.”

In the coming months, therefore, let us make organisation, both from the structural and from the individual point of view, one of our chief objects, and let us try to ensure that the virility and enthusiasm which now characterise our best-organised areas are extended throughout the Federation.

THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

The failure of the British Government to ratify the Convention which was adopted in Geneva in 1931, providing for a reduction of hours in coal mines, is a very big disappointment to our members. In this matter, it has long been evident that the Government has not been prepared to take the initiative in pressing for the ratification of the Convention by other countries, but has adopted tactics designed to obstruct the efforts which have been made by certain other Governments and by the workers' representatives. In these circumstances, we may have to consider taking independent action to secure a reduction of hours in this country, a step which in my opinion is long overdue. We note the success of our French comrades in this direction, and it may well be that a reduction of hours will be the next big objective of the Federation. This is a matter for the consideration of your Executive Committee, but I know that I am expressing the views of the Committee, and indeed of the whole Federation, when I say that we are not prepared to wait indefinitely in this matter, and that if we cannot get satisfaction through Geneva, then we must take our own course to give effect to the will of the members.

On these occasions it is not usual to refer to subjects other than mining, but this year I feel that no remarks on the international situation would be complete without some reference to the heroic struggle of the Spanish people. Let us not forget that the principles of democratic Government and personal liberty which the Spanish Government are now defending are principles which, in this country, are the very breath of our existence.

Let us remember, also, the terrible consequences of a Fascist victory in Spain. A victory for the rebels would mean the ruthless subjugation of

these principles, the domination of Europe by the Fascist Powers, and, sooner or later, another great war, for does it not become clearer every day that the Fascist Powers have designs on Spain which are inimical to the interests of both Britain and France?

But the Spanish workers are unconquered; with no military training, with little military leadership, with inadequate arms and equipment, and with severely limited resources, they have waged a magnificent struggle against forces which, from the start, had every possible advantage, and which, despite the non-intervention Agreement, have since been powerfully reinforced by two of the greatest military Powers in the world. In this matter we, at least, know where we stand. There is no doubt as to the side on which OUR sympathies lie, and I feel that I cannot let the occasion pass without expressing through this representative assembly of British miners our sorrow for the sufferings of the Spanish workers, our admiration for their valour and endurance, and our unshakeable belief that the principles for which they fight will triumph in the end.