

## ACTING-PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Mr. W. LAWTHER Acting President :

FELLOW MEMBERS,

WHEN the period between our last Annual Conference and the present one comes to be examined in a more quiet era, it might well be that this short space of time, a mere twelve months, may show greater changes in the life of nations, greater economic upheavals and certainly the gravest betrayal of the hopes and aspirations of democracies in the whole course of human history.

### CONSCRIPTION

The fundamental change in our home affairs has been the introduction of a system of military conscription. Within a few days the whole course of life has been changed for all young men of these isles. With the merits or demerits we are not here concerned at the moment, but let no one fail to appreciate that he would indeed be an optimist who would attempt to forecast what the effects will be on our young people. Never again can life be the same for them.

It is the first count in the indictment against this Government that their actions made it necessary to adopt this vital change in our national life and policy. The excuse of the National Government that they ask us to accept as a reason was their failure to see the clear and definite intentions of the dictators on the Continent who climbed to power by smashing movements similar to this Trade Union movement, and every other phase of democratic thought, life and opinion, however and wherever it was expressed.

### INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Twelve months ago we were fired with enthusiasm, with zeal, with high hopes in our endeavour to help our Spanish comrades. No body of men rallied the waning spirits of the British Labour movement more than did our membership, to that cause. To-day that bulwark of democracy has gone down in the fight against Fascism ; no Government did more to help to kill Spanish democracy than our own National Government.

Others have written of that dark chapter; of how those whom we might have saved have been subject to every outrage that human fiends could conceive.

Czecho-Slovakia is another of the outposts of democracy that was sold, sealed and delivered to Fascism. Here we have in our midst

the living remnants of that outrage, for which, even at this eleventh hour, the Prime Minister admits his guilt.

These two betrayals are the major ones; others have followed in logical sequence and others must and will follow unless an immediate change in those in charge of the reins of Government here takes place.

With that consideration, this Conference must and will deal, representing as we do the largest group of workers and their wives and families in a single industry. No step that we take, no decision that we make, can ignore the paramount needs of the hour, and that is, there can be no real advance in social and industrial progress whilst this menace of Fascism hangs over us. To deny it is to refuse to face facts. We have just returned from the 25th session of the I.L.O. at Geneva, which was founded in 1919 to seek to erect a standard of social justice for all toilers. What was the dominant factor, the cardinal feature in all the discussions for a shorter working week? It was one only, that a standstill order must operate for the present until a definite and drastic change takes place in the political and international situation. There were assembled representatives of Governments, of employers and of workers from the nations who desire changes and improvements in the lot of their people. But whatever the occupation, grade or class of workers that the principle had to be applied to, leave it undone for to-day was the order of the day. Not that some Governments were not prepared to do it, but rather that they knew that with a nation of the industrial and productive capacity of Germany increasing workers' hours it was madness to pretend that a move forward could be made. Striking testimony to that fact was forthcoming in the Committee dealing with miners' hours. There were assembled our mining comrades of practically every country who did not hide the truth that has been revealed of the terrible, brutal lot that German miners to-day are undergoing. The German workers' position was aptly described by the workers' delegate of the U.S.A. at the Conference when he said:—

“The simple fact is that the most unfortunate relief worker in America eats better food, has warmer clothes, is better housed and breathes clearer air than the millions who toil as did the slaves of ancient Egypt under conditions of brutal domination of which American penal institutions would be ashamed.”

Then he further urged that

“The Fascist Governments are the proponents of an aggressive nationalistic solution of their countries' problems without regard for the fate of interests of other countries and people and without regard for the ideal of social justice. In the attainment of their objectives labour has been reduced to serfdom, capital has been regimented, free peoples have been enslaved, and the world has been kept on the verge of war, because in the final analysis their objectives, economic as well as political, can only be attained by ruthless military methods.”

It is no use criticising the I.L.O. for not doing the things it cannot do, nor has never intended to do. The fault lies nearer home than in Geneva. It lies in the method our National Government has adopted in its toadying to the gang of gangsters, the Fascist powers, who

masquerade as the deliverers of the peoples of the earth from bondage. Did time permit, it would be the simplest process to build up that case; how since 1931 reaction in the saddle in Britain has meant reaction intensified abroad. Even the most reactionary of the National Government now admit that simple truth which the most humble have seen so clearly for so many years. And in a flash when they see the light they have tried to dodge still further the issues that peace between nations of opposites is impossible. Fascism and Democracy can never intermingle, can never be appeased. And that means we must have alliances with nations who seek peace in the sure and certain knowledge that without it there can be no progress either materially or culturally for the common people. It is our duty to our own folk to indicate our profound belief and sincere conviction that there can be no hope of peace, no relief from that anxiety which overwhelms and overshadows all mankind, unless there exists definite alliances with the only Government of the common people in Europe, namely Russia. It is idle, it is stupid, nay it is criminal to delay the signing of that alliance on the flimsy pretexts and pretences that are being put forward in some quarters.

Is there any wonder that Russia doubts our Government's intentions and wants clarity? We in this movement are not astonished because we know from bitter experience during the past decade how essential it is to have documents properly signed and sealed when understandings are being effected. Surely it is more necessary for heads of our Government to meet the heads of the U.S.S.R. than it was to fly to Munich to sign the betrayal of a brave nation. That action would be in the nature of atonement for past errors.

Finally, in international affairs, we offer, in the name of the British miners, to our Chinese comrades in their struggle our sincere congratulations and hope for their ultimate victory. They can rest assured that there is not in Britain anyone who agrees with the brutal and murderous attack on their nation, with its consequent massacre and outrages of their people. Here again one sees the price that Britain has paid and will have to pay for that jesting Pilate of a statesman, Sir John Simon, who paved the way and encouraged the first beginnings of this carnage of a nation in 1931.

Since this speech was written, there has been two pronouncements on Foreign policy to which I must refer, namely, the speech of Lord Halifax and the appeal of the National Council of Labour, to which as a member of that body I entirely agree and concur in its conception of duty to our German comrades.

With reference to the clear warning to the Dictators, made by the Foreign Secretary, there will be no member of either the trade union or the political movement who will disagree with either its message or what is implied, nor the need for those human fiends, who have destroyed every semblance of law to know that a halt must be called to their destruction of human liberty and freedom.

From the inception of Fascism and terror in Italy, to the enthronement of Hitler and murder in Germany, the Labour Movement has made its protest and urged that a stand should be taken. We know what that means; we realise the terrible consequences, but just as it has been necessary in the evolution of our own movement, the struggle for recognition and to obtain an improvement in the lot of our people, drastic action and great sacrifices have had to be made, so will we as part of this nation that loveth liberty and cherishes freedom and has placed the right of free speech and assembly as a jewel without price, accept our share in that stand against aggression.

We know that the speech of the Foreign Secretary, in its approach towards that ideal of fighting Fascism, of indicating to the bullies and murderers of Democracy that their end is drawing nigh, has given the first ray of hope since those dark days of September last, when the Prime Minister set on his misguided jaunts to attempt to appease the Dictators, who only live by seeking to destroy that conception of thought, of government, of civilisation, that we in these islands have adopted as part of life itself.

Therefore, to us it matters not from whosoever or wherever comes the call for a stand to be made, we will accept it and answer it, in order that the ways of men shall be along lines of peaceful endeavour to improve their conditions and live a life of fellowship and usefulness. As already stated, we believe that that conception is only possible by an alliance with our fellow-workers of Soviet Russia.

With regard to the human appeal of the National Council of Labour, I feel that I am speaking for every miner when I state that not only do they endorse it, but that we shall take the opportunity this week of sending a similar direct message to those slaves of the lamp in Nazi Germany and to those brave souls typical of our calling, who are facing death itself in spreading the light by urging German miners to fight for that liberty of expression, of the right of combination that we at this very moment are enjoying and will continue to safeguard and defend.

#### SAFETY

In the mining world the most outstanding event has been the report of the Royal Commission. Here at this our first Conference since the publication of the Report, let me pay, on your behalf, our tribute to the quiet, effective work of our two colleagues, D. R. Grenfell, M.P., and our General Secretary, Ebbv Edwards. 'Tis usual in some circles to await the arrival of the corpse before services are acknowledged. We feel sure you prefer we should say to them now that we look forward in the forthcoming session of Parliament that the recommendations of our two Commissioners and their colleagues shall pass on to the Statute Book.

Naturally with all reforms advocated or suggested there is criticism, not always uninterested nor always pure criticism, but miners always

remember one simple fact, that 77 years ago in the County of Northumberland at Hartley Colliery it took a toll of boys and men to be lost before two shafts were compulsory at a single mine. And that, alas, has unfortunately too often been the pathway of the pioneer of safety measures.

To those critics, to those wherever they may be or whoever they are that wish for more time to consider this, that or the other recommendation, let them just look up the report and remember this terrible indictment of Britain's major industry is recorded there:—

“Mining is the most dangerous of all the major industries, though it must be borne in mind that the natural conditions under which work has to be carried on in mining are quite different from the conditions in these other industries. As regards fatal accidents, mining is closely approached by shipping, but the death rate in mining per 1,000 persons employed is 50 per cent. higher than in docks (the next highest after shipping) and nine times as high as in factories. As regards non-fatal accidents, the position of mining in this respect is even more striking, for the mining rate is nearly twice that for docks, over five times that for shipping, and six times as high as in factories. In the period of nearly three years covered by our inquiry the annual average loss of life by accidents in mines under the Coal Mines Act has been approximately 850, the average annual number of persons so injured as to be off work for three days or more has been over 135,000, and on the average nearly 8,000 persons have contracted each year one of the occupational diseases for which compensation is payable. Each year one person in every 900 employed loses his life while at work at the mine, and two in every 11 receive statutory compensation for injury or disease contracted during the year, and while these numbers naturally fluctuate from year to year, there has been no change in the general level during the last 15 years or more. These are grave figures which cry out for reduction. We feel sure that, given the necessary effort, they can be reduced; but the substantial reduction for which we hope can only be achieved if all concerned play their part in making the effort.”—(*Report of the Royal Commission on Safety in Coal Mines*—pages 5 and 6.)

Until that state of affairs is eradicated as part of the normal process of an industry, we cannot and will not rest. *Safety first* has to be something more than a slogan. It is an obligation resting upon every person in the Industry, whatever his function or sphere to change that loss of life in the Industry.

There will be opportunity this week to discuss these recommendations and we will say right now that the repetition of platitudes on this question of life and limb are no longer required.

We mentioned the subject of hours in connection with the recent Conference of the I.L.O. as it had been dealt with from an international aspect.

## HOURS

The report of your Executive Committee, together with the pamphlet issued by the Secretary with the full authority of the Executive Committee, indicates the point of view of those upon whom has been placed the responsibility of giving advice and guidance on this question. No

sane person accepts the present hours as being the limit of our demands. When the question of safety comes to be discussed in the legislative assembly, that will be the time for an examination of this case. Only let us repeat what has been said in other places, it is no credit to Britain that next to the miners of Nazi Germany, British miners' hours are the longest in Europe. The least that ought to be forthcoming is for a return to the pre-1926 position of a seven-hour day. The profits made in the inland districts with help in the form of a subsidy for the export areas could easily achieve this state. And it would be a complete answer to those forces on the Continent who doubt our strength of recovery.

Your Executive Committee has pursued every avenue in their endeavours to obtain this highly desirable reform by negotiation. It is now the business of Parliament to deal with it from a safety and humane point of view.

### SELLING PRICES

When the campaign for an increased wage was in operation a few years ago, everywhere there was a desire expressed to have something done for the miners. Everyone agreed that prices were too low and machinery, long advocated, was set up to have wages improved, but immediately the machinery began to operate, those who had been used to having cheap coal to make their industrial fortunes began to squeal. Valuable time has been spent in listening to these complaints; time that could and ought to have been used in other directions of dealing with the fortunes made out of the products of coal. Cheaper coal can only mean cheaper miners, or to put it bluntly and in language that cannot bear two interpretations, less wages for miners. That state of affairs we will not accept to suit those who can well afford to pay the prices that give us even the very inadequate wages prevailing to-day. We trust that those who have been behind this racket of cheaper coal will turn their attention in some other direction, if they desire bigger profits, because from the miners it cannot be forthcoming. The miner wants a standard of life now, when he is alive and well. He is able to appreciate that far, far better than sympathy and relief when he becomes a victim of one of those 850 fatal accidents that take place practically every year in the industry.

We feel that unless we give this advice to those well-meaning interfering busy-bodies, they might well believe that the miners are not interested in their machinations. Perhaps they will now understand a little more clearly that we prefer their non-intervention to their intervention in affairs that can only affect them very remotely. If it be that they are interested in the poor consumers of domestic coal there are channels open to them that if pursued will have our whole hearted co-operation. In a parting word, let them remember that this bogey of the poor consumer used to be one of Mr. Hitler's special features that he forgot when he gained power.

## WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION

No section of workers has been more persistent in advocating redress for the injured and killed in industry than the M.F.G.B. As everyone is aware, this is the subject of enquiry by a Royal Commission. Evidence has now been tabled, and as the miners have a special case for the Commission, in a few weeks that case will be presented. It has, as all district officials are aware, been the subject of special research. The terms of reference are published in the E.C. report and the Federation's case will be before you. It only remains for me to state in order to remove any misapprehension or misunderstanding, that whilst the Commission are empowered to consider every phase and feature of evidence laid before it, it will be some time before their findings are known. That does not preclude the Government of the day, if they so desire, from immediately taking such measures as they care to increase the very inadequate amounts now paid to these victims of our industrial system.

## HOLIDAYS WITH PAY

Much has been written up of the fact that for the first time in our history practically every district comprising the Federation have this year got Holidays with Pay. Yet it would be very unwise for anyone to assume that the various schemes and methods adopted meet with unanimous approval and approbation. The miner has his wages regulated differently to any other trade. He is dependent upon the economic resources of his industry. And his holiday scheme is likewise hidebound by all manner of restrictions that are not operative in other professions. We have never been able to understand or appreciate why such a fundamental distinction should be made as to holidays for one section of industrial workers against what is termed the black-coated workers.

## UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment is still a serious problem in the Mining Industry, and, in spite of the fact that there is a reduction of 44,190 compared with a year ago, there are still 106,318 unemployed in the Coal Mining Industry.

Unemployment brings in its train problems affecting both the health and morale of the unemployed man and woman, and it is time an attack was made on this scourge of our economic life. Nothing which the Government has done, apart from the expenditure on armaments, has touched the fringe of the problem, and steps should be taken with a view to meeting a serious position that will arise when saturation point is reached in re-armament.

Among the unemployed in our own industry are hundreds of men who have been certified recovered by the Official Medical Referee either from an injury or a scheduled disease and for whom the industry cannot or will not find employment.

We think that arrangements ought to be made to rehabilitate such men for work again in the industry by giving them a period of three to six months light work so that they can be gradually brought up to a condition where they can undertake their own particular class of work. This is especially needed where the workman has been incapacitated for a long period.

The introduction of machine-mining has made it more difficult for the older unemployed miner to be re-absorbed into the industry, and they present a problem which demands a frontal attack for its complete solution. Here again, we think that, as an immediate step, a period of training for such men in lighter jobs in the mine could be considered, and they could relieve younger men for the more complicated work of machine-mining.

It is no use setting men back to heavy work who have been unemployed in the industry for two or more years, for it penalises both them and their families, and we believe that if steps were taken to gradually accustom such men to their own work it would have beneficial results to the men and the industry.

A Labour Government in office operating the short-term programme, including the pension scheme, would go a long way toward easing the position of the unemployed and the question of unemployment with the abolition of the Means Test.

Whilst Ministers may congratulate themselves in the reduction of the numbers of the unemployed, the stark fact of a million and a half appearing in the registers as unemployed is itself a condemnation of both themselves and the system they uphold.

#### ORGANISATION OF FEDERATION

For many years there has appeared on the Agenda of Annual Conferences a resolution seeking for one miners' union. Never, whilst it was in the resolutionary stage was it opposed; it was accepted as an ideal goal to be entered into without delay. Several occasions within recent years it has been attempted by that style of progress so thoroughly British, first agreeing that it should be, secondly examining why we want that which we agreed upon, and thirdly referring it to another stage of inquiry that ended in our not accepting what we thought we had agreed was essential. In short, we have put it off until another day which some of its supporters hope will never dawn. That may be very useful for an ordinary debating society, but it is certainly of no use to build an organisation that we believe is necessary for the best interests of our members.

Leaving, therefore, for some other Annual Conference the decision of whether or not we seek one miners' union, your Executive Committee have submitted proposals that in their judgment they think will help towards a strengthening of the organisation, fit it and equip it to fill the part that this Federation ought to accept for the tasks that lie ahead. We hope that everyone of you will seek to have that ideal

and objective in view when we come to discuss these proposals, namely for the better organisation of the Federation, the interests of the mass of the membership, the attainment of the greatest service for that mass whose lot will only be improved in so far as the organisation itself is strengthened.

That, we feel, is the spirit in which this Annual Conference will enter upon its task, realising the needs of the moment is for improvement and advance of this cause of Trade Unionism, that is the basis, the bulwark and the foundation of the Labour Movement as a whole.