

MR. W. E. JONES (Vice-President): Fellow delegates, it gives me the greatest possible pleasure to call upon our President, Sir William Lawther, to give his Presidential Address.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

SIR WILLIAM LAWThER (President): Fellow delegates, In extending a welcome to you at the 5th Annual Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers, might I suggest to those who are always looking at the blackest side that they should read again the reports of the two previous conferences which were held here in 1921 and 1928, and they will see more than the changes the years have brought, they will show how at last the foundation has been laid for the structure which our predecessors so earnestly desired when they met at the two previous Llandudno Conferences.

Today I am going to begin my Address to you where I left off last year. Last year we knew that there would have to be a General Election before this week's Conference, and I put it to you in this language :

"Ere we meet again in an Annual Conference, it may well be that we shall have to face a General Election; one in which there can be no doubt as to the issues involved. We as miners know far, far better than any other section of the British Community, what our fate will be if it should come to pass that a Tory Government should be given another lease of life. It would mean the end of all hope. Once again there would be valleys of despair and desolation. The hungry forties of the nineteenth century would be the bitter, hungry fifties of the twentieth century. I am therefore asking you, in your own interests and in the interests of those you love, and all you hold dear, from now on to do all that lies in your power to make sure that when the time comes in 1950 you will be ready and more than willing to sweep away all opposition to Labour, from wherever it may come. Here is the opportunity for those who shout unity the most, to do the job of making a united front for Labour. The call goes forth from miner to miner; those who are not with us in this effort must be regarded as being against us.

There can be no departure from the policy we have adopted; long years ago the miners decided to work for and support the Labour Party. That is still our policy, and I urge you not only to keep in step with that historic decision, but let every delegate here resolve that he will fight all comers who, by word or deed, attempt to break that democratic decision. You owe that to the countless thousands of men and women who preceded you, and gave their lives to the cause. Your tribute to them, the test of your faith is your loyalty, and devotion to Labour's great cause."

None will dispute the fact that that was more than a forecast of what was likely to take place. It was a prophecy which was fulfilled and your National Executive Committee have put on record their appreciation of the response which was made to the Manifesto which, with my two national colleagues, was signed in the name of your National Executive Committee. The result of the General Election, although it left the Labour Government still in office, but with a greatly reduced majority, revealed a serious problem. It

showed that our party, founded and sustained for half a century by the unions, did not get the full support of trade unionists. In fact I will go so far as to say that the millions of trade unionists in this Election, if they had all voted, and voted Labour, would and should have won the Election. We need not have had to worry about the middle-class vote or any other body of voters if the 8 million members of trade unions in affiliation with the T.U.C. with the adult members of their own families, in their own homes, had all voted for the Labour candidates.

It is true that the total Labour vote was 13½ million—the largest vote ever polled by a political party in any of the General Elections in our time. But I reckon that 8 million trade unionists with wives, sons and daughters of voting age, if they had all voted Labour, would have added several million more votes to the Party's 13 million.

There have been a good many reasons advanced to account for the parliamentary deadlock that has arisen in consequence of the General Election. I will name one reason that needs thinking about. There is evidence that a destructive influence is at work inside our own movement. It takes the form of a persistent misrepresentation of its policy and a disparagement of its achievements in home and foreign affairs.

Something also happened at the last Election that has not taken place before, and I feel that I would be failing in my duty if I did not draw your attention to it. There may have been criticism in the past with regard to the selection of candidates whom the Union supports, but we have never before seen miners, who themselves subscribe to the Labour faith, running as candidates for another party to defeat the official Miners' Candidates. I know the arguments which are used by those miners who ran under the Communist banner. They declared that they were exercising their right as citizens. It has been said that these people received their answer from the electorate; that, as the summary of results of the Election in the mining constituencies as set out on pages 22 and 23 of the Committee's Report will show, is true, but it is a strange doctrine to exercise a right which in every Communist country is denied to those who are not Communists. It is itself a negation, if one were needed, of the high democratic standards which are operating in Britain. It is for you to face up to this new tactic now, otherwise it may well be that within a few years this will multiply. I feel that once the Union has decided its policy, industrially or politically, it is the duty of the members to carry that through loyally. If there is one factor that miners abhor more than another, it is those who run away once a decision has been taken by the Union. Those who built this organisation suffered many hardships in their adherence to decisions of the Union, and this modern form of political blacklegging must cease, otherwise we shall find ourselves torn in pieces. It is true politically, as it is true industrially—united we stand, divided we fall. We had too long and arduous a battle for political independence to throw it away lightly. The Tories certainly showed us at the Election how anxious they were to defeat the Labour Party.

Worse than the open Communist propaganda in the Election is the insidious and malicious campaign they carry on to arouse distrust and suspicion in the minds of trade unionists; to magnify every difficulty that arises in the

nationalised industries; to sneer at the efforts we have to make to associate the workers more and more closely with the administration of the publicly owned industries and services. All this sort of thing, going on day after day in the factories and in the mines, the shipyards and the docks, has been having an effect upon the attitude of many trade unionists and wage earners generally towards the Labour Government.

You will be asked again during this Conference to state your views on this vital question, in a resolution which will come before you, pledging your continued support to your Labour Government, that has done so much to change your lives. I beg of you to indicate your approval in a conscientious manner. If you agree to give the Labour Government your support, then let it be understood that Union policy means loyalty to decisions, and support for the principles you have adopted. There is a phase in connection with our elections which I would like you to consider—a vital necessity for real success—the winning of those constituencies where the electorate is almost persuaded that Socialist light is better than the gloom and darkness of the Tories. We must have more co-ordination of effort from those of our constituencies which are now acknowledged to be safe Labour seats. They should, without being told, give positive, material help to divisions which are on their borders and where the vote is not quite so certain. That extra bit of canvassing, that other meeting may make all the difference.

We have now had the benefit of the changes in social security over the past three years. Here again it is necessary to stress that, as those of you who are active know, it will continue to be a matter for the most earnest consideration to seek alterations indicated by the experiences of our members. This is something essential to a well-organised, efficient welfare service. Let those who will belittle our health and welfare services, but we know that it is a sign of real national pride, of inestimable value to a nation, to have healthy citizens. To those who say, can we afford them, the answer is we cannot afford to be without them.

One of the features of legislation which the Labour Government initiated and placed on the Statute Book was that which, for the first time in British history, made it possible for damages to be claimed either for injuries or loss of life, where negligence could be proved. Those of you acquainted with the history of this will remember the part that was played by our own Members of Parliament, the N.U.M. and the T.U.C. I think it is as well to mention this fact, because it appears that today, after the Labour Government has altered the Law (we were fortunate in having two miners, Jim Griffiths and Aneurin Bevan, in charge of social security and health measures), other people are claiming the credit for these changes. This is not the first time that Labour has pioneered for an ideal which has ultimately found its way upon the Statute Book, and other people claimed that they were the originators. This measure has always appeared to us to be plain justice and common sense, even when it met with the most bitter opposition from vested interests, and I am glad that it is now possible for the dependants of those who are so unfortunate as to suffer an accident or be killed, to be looked after in a way superior to that of the past. It is as well that our members should appreciate this fact, rather than that it should appear due to causes outside

our ranks. We as miners know that it has always been easy for some folk to fill coals if somebody else had hewed them!

When I was elected President of the old Miners' Federation in 1939, my successor as Vice-President was Jim Bowman. In the ten years he filled that position, it was with credit to the organisation, and he worked insistently and persistently for the improvement of his fellows. When his transfer took place from the Vice-Presidency of the National Union to the Chairmanship of the Northern Division of the National Coal Board, your appreciation of his services was placed on record, and will go down in our history, although it raised questions which I feel it is essential for the Union and the industry to face up to, fairly and squarely. I cannot understand those who talk about workers playing their part in the running of their industry and being given more power, condemning those who take the step in which they themselves believe. It is vitally necessary that we should continue to play our part in the changing of the whole structure of this industry. How far this can be done and to what extent we can participate is a matter to be determined. Every single individual member has his part to play in this task. It is necessary that this truism should be continually reiterated, because there do exist a few individuals who really believe that the decision of Parliament to change over the ownership of the mines from private to public ownership was the end of all our troubles. Today those who hold that fond belief ought to know better. There are problems which have developed over the past three years that no one could have foreseen. It is essential that there should be frank and open discussion of those problems; they are not solved by purges; the way exists in the consultative machinery and inside the Trade Union Movement to seek for a solution. Remember you still possess that pearl without price—free expression of opinion.

Within a few years there will come into your ranks men who have never worked under private ownership and maybe they, too, will view their problems from an entirely different angle from that of yesterday's generation. One of the signs of the times is that today's youth is keener to study the technical problems of the industry, borne out by the numbers attending technical classes. This new generation is going to seek those key posts that have to be manned and we should see to it that their qualifications will be knowledge and understanding of the service that can be rendered to a national industry. Merit and ability must be the standard.

Of course, there are others on the managerial side today who for some strange reason believe that all our troubles began with nationalisation. The chief prophet of this gospel of woe is the President of the National Association of Colliery Management, who stated in his Presidential Address that one-third of the extra output since nationalisation was all stone. No figures were given, no evidence adduced, it being left for the outsider to believe that the man at the coalface, living and working under conditions which thousands had the opportunity to follow, when we needed miners, was guilty of another foul practice. If Mr. Walton Brown believes that the brutal, repressive measures adopted in the past are to be again operative, when miners were fined and dismissed for circumstances over which they had no control, then the sooner he realises that this will not be tolerated, the better for the industry. Those

“good old days” have gone—they are as dead as the Tory remedy put forward at the last Election, of decentralisation.

You must be on your guard every day in every way against those who will neglect no opportunity to besmirch the changes that have taken place, and have given opportunities to all in the industry that formerly were the privilege of the few. That type of mind is not concerned with the industry from a national aspect; their sense of grievance against a publicly owned interest is only to be measured by the privileges they have forfeited through their neglect of so valuable a national asset. There has never been any phase of human betterment which that type of critic has not opposed. They were born in opposition to progress, they thrived on squalor and their sense of shame is in the reverse order to that of an ordinary man’s sense of decency. You who have realised the change public ownership of this vital industry has meant to your folk, have to be vigilant in the attempt being made to undermine the foundations of the new order, of the greater possibilities for those employed in the industry.

Let me turn to the question of wages. I will not touch on the negotiations with the National Coal Board arising from the claim on behalf of lower-paid workmen, as this particular aspect of the problem is covered by the Report of the National Executive Committee and this will be brought up-to-date at an appropriate time during this Conference.

In our own industry we are now engaged in examining the details of a new wages structure; there is at the moment in certain instances a quite unreal gap between the wages of the lower-paid workmen and some of those who are engaged on piecework, and no account is taken of the very important fact that were it not for the co-operation and consistent work of the lower-paid men, it would not always be possible for the pieceworker to keep up his earnings. We must, in my view, devise some system under which *all* workers can benefit from the increased rate of production and under which all can claim an appropriate share in the improved position of the industry. I hope that during the forthcoming months we shall concentrate our attention on this particular phase of the problem.

As your representative on the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, however, it is necessary for me to make one or two comments on the general situation. The General Council have throughout the past year or so supported the policy of restraint because they believed such a policy was in the best interest of the members. We believed, and still believe, that inflation, which must inevitably follow a policy of unrestricted wage demands, will lead to a general lowering of the standard of living of the workers, particularly those in the lower wage groups. It is interesting to note that of all the speeches which have been made against the General Council on this question, I cannot recall one in which opposition has been expressed to the basic principles of the Council’s policy; the opposition has arisen, in the main, on the question of profits and it would seem that, had some policy been devised which would have assured complete restraint in profits as well as wages there would have been no grounds for such opposition.

At no time has the General Council of the Trades Union Congress been opposed to increases in wages for lower-paid workmen, and they have gone

so far as to welcome increases for the higher wage groups, where such increases have been related to increased production. I believe, with the majority of my colleagues, that it would be far more beneficial to the community as a whole if steps were taken to reduce the cost of living, rather than bring about increases in money wages; there are thousands of our people on fixed incomes, old age pensioners, persons in receipt of injuries benefits, persons in receipt of sickness allowances and other forms of pensions, and it would be far better that we should seek to ensure that the purchasing value of the pound should be increased, for by so doing we would achieve far more for our people than by following a policy of unrestricted demands for wage increases.

Those who assail the T.U.C. policy on wages simply do not know the facts about it. It was not planned for the purpose of bringing about a dead standstill on wages. It was a policy aiming at stabilisation all round by the exercise of a reasonable measure of restraint on all increases of personal incomes, combined with stabilisation of prices, profits and production costs. Such stabilisation was necessary whilst the country put forth the utmost effort to increase productivity and improve the efficiency of industry. The T.U.C. policy involved the Unions in a united effort to help the country to solve its production problem, its financial problem, and its export problem. It can be claimed for the Unions that they have made a great contribution to the solution of these problems, by the restraint they have practised in the matter of wages, and by their co-operation in the production drive.

What happened last year in productive industry was a very remarkable achievement whichever way you look at it. There was an overall increase of nearly 4 per cent per man per year in 1949. Industrial production, strictly so-called, rose by $6\frac{1}{2}$ per cent, which was much better than the economic experts thought it could possibly be. And it is still rising. All this is evidence that the policy laid down for the Unions by the T.U.C., which linked co-operation in the production drive with stabilisation of wages and all other forms of personal income, was soundly conceived. It was the right policy in the circumstances, and its soundness has been verified by the facts. Of course, it becomes necessary to revise and modify any policy when circumstances change. In view of the improving outlook for our country, the T.U.C. General Council are considering now the possibility of the Unions applying the policy with greater flexibility. But circumstances do not warrant a general scramble for indiscriminate wage increases. It is more necessary than ever for us to observe caution, so that the inflationary tendencies which have been largely brought under control do not get the upper hand again. If the inflationary movement starts again, all that we have gained during the last two years will be jeopardised. Instead of asking for more wages, we shall see Unions struggling to prevent wage cuts; we shall see the real purchasing-power value of wages sink steadily, and we shall throw away the great gains won by the steady pursuit of the Labour Government's economic and financial policy—the maintenance of full employment and of the system of social security, including the very substantial addition to the family income represented by children's allowances, the food subsidies, the free medical service, the national insurance benefits—which are all being provided for out of the expanding resources of the country under Labour rule.

These are some of the problems which our movement has to face. It would be impossible for me to deal with all the problems which confront us, nor would it be desirable for me to do so. You will discuss some of them during the week, when your decisions will be awaited with great interest by our members, and the Labour Movement as a whole. Your National Executive Committee in their Report cover a wide field ; their endeavours towards real help for our membership is a record to be proud of, and I have no doubt will be accepted in that spirit by all who desire to see a flourishing mining industry playing a real and vital part in our national economy.

My final word to you, fellow delegates, is that I hope you will endeavour this week to keep that standard before you, and when we leave Llandudno this week, it will not be as on the previous occasions we met here—with regrets over our past actions and pessimism as to the future—but with the knowledge that achievements of the past few years will be maintained. To do that requires clear understanding of the problems yet to be solved, and the courage of wise decisions.