

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

MR. J. BOWMAN (Vice-President) : We have now reached the stage where it is my duty and my pleasure to call upon our President, Sir William Lawther, to deliver his Presidential Address.

FELLOW DELEGATES,

Since we last met in the South Wales coalfield, changes have taken place which not even the most optimistic could have imagined in 1939. The comparisons in the wages have only to be examined in order to bring home to even the most arch pessimist the change that has taken place. In 1939 the average wage in the South Wales coalfield was 11s. 5d. per shift including allowances; today it is 31s. 0d. In 1939 for the whole of the British coalfield it was 12s. per shift including allowances and today it is 34s. 1d. Perhaps the best guide to the average wage is the amount we receive in holiday pay, which is based upon wages for the previous year. As you are all aware, the amount paid out for this year's holidays will be £7 10s. 0d. for adult workers, whereas ten years ago the payment, on the average, was less than half this amount.

In 1939 we were just at that stage when the international situation was black. The forces of Nazism and Fascism seemed to be supreme. Strange alliances were developing. Let it never be forgotten that within two months of that Conference, Britain gave the lead and took the lead in the stand against Nazi and Fascist domination. We often hear talk of what history will record, but history will record no more glorious event than that stand. That was the determining factor which changed the world.

I well remember at that Conference, ten years ago, when all ahead seemed dark as night, declaring :

"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."

Little did we know the terrible cost in which that struggle would involve us, yet it had to be undertaken or the further progress of mankind would have been prevented for decades.

In midsummer, 1945, we looked with hope and enthusiasm to a newer and better world. Alas! Those hopes have faded and they who by circumstances were forced to act together in the days when Hitler held sway, now allow circumstances to force them asunder. It is the business of conscientious men and women to seek to understand these circumstances. Nobody has tried more than the British Trade Union Movement to further unity amongst the world's workers. We led the way as free men and women. Today we have had to take the course of leaving those who act under orders to pursue their own course. Attempts are being made here in this country to create the impression that it is the Trades Union Congress that is wrong, and that those who never cease to utter the most foul, malicious and venomous attacks on the Trades Union Congress, are right. Facts are easily ascertainable as to the correctness of the position of the T.U.C., and I must warn this Conference not to be taken in by specious generalisations of unity that often mask these attacks.

UNOFFICIAL STOPPAGES

Two years ago, at our Annual Conference I said to my own people :

"There can be little doubt of the new status you have won in the nation. There can be no question of the value that a single trade union organisation in the mining industry and nationalisation of the mines have brought to you and yours, and there are greater gains still to come. But my appeal is this. Whatever other folks do, we have to set the example. We know our trade, its dangers and hardships, but we are pitmen, and we have never been afraid of anything in our lives. This is why I am sure we are again going to demonstrate to the common people that we will get the maximum of coal that lies in our power; that we will eliminate avoidable absenteeism; that we will get our best men on the Pit Consultative Committees and fight to see that our practical experience in each mine is reflected in the character of the suggestions we have to put forward

"On our part we promise you service that is the best any Trade Union can give, but we have also a right to expect that there shall be an end to unofficial strikes. We know the difficulties and sometimes the provocation, but you now have machinery for settling problems as they arise that you never had before; it is a crime against our own people that unofficial strikes should take place, and we advise you in your own interest to watch very carefully those who so readily call on you to strike. They are not your friends; they have other axes to grind than yours. Be on your guard against them.

"The Officers of this Union in whatever sphere or capacity they operate are under the obligation to take the earliest attempt to deal with any and every grievance, and therefore it is incumbent upon our members to use the machinery and to cease the phase of operations that used to be conducted against the coal owners, often at a terrible price.

"This organisation is a democratic organisation and there are the utmost facilities for discussion of all those problems which concern the human element and those who indulge in these stoppages are only belittling their own organisation.

"The time has come for very plain speaking on this matter. No stoppages can be justified, having regard to the present dire need for coal. In view of all the circumstances, no miners in the world enjoy a higher standard than the British miners have obtained within so short a period. Within one generation we have stepped from the position of being veritable slaves of the lamp to being the joint participators in the ownership, well-being and welfare of the industry. The National Coal Board has met us fairly and squarely."

I see no reason to withdraw one single word of what I said on that occasion. We have witnessed within recent months here, there and everywhere not only

in the mining industry, but elsewhere in docks and railways, stoppages which have brought more joy and consolation to our political opponents than if they had won every by-election they had lost.

It is not playing the game to give expression of approval to the great achievements of your Labour Government, and then to stop the pit on some paltry, trivial matter, when the greatest good you can do for yourselves and your fellows is to have the matter put right by ordinary negotiations and consultation. Of course, if you have political views contrary to the Labour Government, and you think the sooner they are replaced by a ruthless, inhuman Tory Government the better, then I suppose such "quisling" actions of unofficial stoppages can be understood. Because let no one attempt to delude you, the choice is between Labour, representing progress through a policy of full employment and the Tories who were responsible for the dark, dismal era between the two wars. Nobody knows this better than the Communist Party and the Tory Party, both of whom are Labour's political opponents.

We are now at the most difficult period in our history. We have social security services second to none—no Nation on the face of the earth has done so much in so short a time for the masses than has been done by this Nation under the Labour Government. Our national health and insurance services are the model and inspiration of free men and women everywhere; just as they are hated, scorned and feared by the privileged everywhere.

OUR FUTURE TASK

We have now to face a very simple fact, which is unpleasant because it is true, and as we know from experience, the truth is often hardest to face. We must, however, ask you in the decisions you will be making in the future months to face the facts. We have said before, and I repeat it now—the National Coal Board has in its short period of office done more for the men and boys in this industry than has been done in the period since coal was first used to give heat and light. It may be correct that the National Coal Board has made errors and misjudgments; it may be true that many in its employ hanker back to the bad old days. It is equally true that many in our ranks conduct themselves as in those bad old days. When all the weaknesses have been accounted for, when all who desire have put across all their alibis, the simple fact remains, that all further improvements have to be paid for by increased production.

In this connection I have to congratulate the majority of those who are concerned in the day to day task of producing coal; they are doing a really grand job but a still greater response is necessary if we as a mining community are going to play our full part in the economic rehabilitation of this country. Do not permit either the ramblings of certain production experts or the supporters of the Communist Party, all of whom can be placed in the category of opponents of our Labour Government, to divert you from your task. I know that in spite of the improvements of the past two years much remains to be done before it can be said that our people are enjoying that standard of living to which their contribution to the Nation's economy entitles them, but a still greater effort is necessary if we are to be able to consolidate our gains. There is no magician's wand that can be applied to solve this problem. It would

be as well if the economics of this industry and this Nation were as thoroughly understood as the mysteries of the football pools seem to be understood by some of our folk. Every available avenue is open to us to know what is wrong, and the right road is there to be used for those who wish to use it.

No one conversant with our policy over these last few years will deny that time and time again it has been made abundantly clear to us that changes brought about to improve the lot of our members have to be paid for out of the industry. Who were more emphatic than those in charge of the Union at the time when money was shovelled out of the public purse to the coal-owners of that period in the form of the huge subsidies they received from their political friends who were in power. It was not a question then of jobs for the boys, they had them, it was BOBS for the NOBS. Let us therefore be realists and face up to facts, now that the industry is owned by the Nation. We know that the majority of our folk will do it and are doing it. There is as great a sense of responsibility of citizenship in our ranks as in any other section of the community and it is their duty, and ours, to teach the minority the civic pride that permeates our movement. Yes, a civic pride that is reflected in the hundreds of our members and their wives who are carrying on their work as members of County, City, Borough and other councils.

Much criticism has been levelled against the National Coal Board during recent months, because they have found it necessary to reject certain of our demands. Let us, however, at least be honest in our criticism.

Every one of you present in this Conference will know that in September, 1945, that was before the Nationalisation Bill was even drafted, this Union accepted the report of a joint committee representative of the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress and this Union, which had been formulating the policy of the Labour Movement; a report which was later to form the basis of the Nationalisation Bill. That report clearly indicated that any board which was to control the nationalised industry must among other things (i) ensure that the revenue of the Board is in the long run sufficient to cover all costs and charges and (ii) maintain wages and working conditions and improve them so as to enable mineworkers to participate in an advancing standard of living and of life.

For the first two years, the National Coal Board paid particular attention to the second point and it is not surprising that during recent months they have found it necessary to give increasing attention to the first. When the National Coal Board assumed office, their first task was to improve the human relationships within the industry for without such improved relationships, the proposed reorganisation schemes could not possibly succeed. Generally speaking, the Board's policy in this connection has been successful. The Board, however, has to face certain economic circumstances and it is worth while to remember that early in 1946 Mr. Shinwell, the then Minister of Fuel and Power, in dealing with the Miners' Charter, reminded us that "the best possible conditions can only be achieved as the industry is reorganised under nationalisation and output is increased." Again some months later, when the Government agreed in principle to a five day working week in the industry, they made it clear that there would require to be full co-operation on the part

of the miners, so that we could "secure the output of coal which is necessary to meet the country's needs."

When, therefore, in 1949, the Board rejects certain proposals of the Union for further improving the standards of our people, do not let us point a finger and accuse them of renouncing their earlier policy at the behest of the Government. Neither should we seek to convey the impression to our members that because of Government policy, the Coal Board are embarking on a policy which involves an attack on the present standards of the mineworkers. It is not true. Everyone of us as responsible leaders foresaw in 1945 and 1946 the difficulties which were likely to confront the industry within a few years. We then accepted the position that, ultimately, increased production would be the only sure way of improving our standards and I deplore the attitude of those who for reasons best known to themselves, now find it convenient to oppose a policy which was acceptable to them a year or so ago and which they know is the only policy which can be followed if we have the best interests of the workers at heart.

The tendency which is being developed in many quarters of ignoring or attempting to ignore, the hard, economic factors, is fraught with the most dire perils for this Nation in general, and this industry in particular. We have to make a break with sheer political opportunism in dealing with the economic problem that confronts us; let me state it bluntly—we either produce what we need and require to maintain the standards of life we now enjoy, or we shall have to accept lesser standards. No word spinning, no dialectical sophistry will get over that problem. We know, and you know, that at the moment we are living on credit. Therefore, we must, as a trade union, begin to consider how far we can perfect our machinery, our organisation, to give more effective help to solving the problem which must be solved if we are to live. I am convinced that this is of supreme importance and I will not have the charge levelled that we neglected to inform you where your duty lies. I have no doubt that it would be very popular to put up a series of demands without ever caring how they could be obtained, I prefer to take what I believe to be the honest way of indicating that your efforts and good behaviour are of more consequence than any sparring for the moon. I cannot accept, or allow a situation to develop that would make a mockery of the sacrifices which men like Peter Lee, Herbert Smith, Robert Smillie, Arthur Cook and others made, to have the industry owned and controlled by the Nation, in the interests of the Nation. I cannot, and will not, accept the position that it is right and laudable to praise the production capacity of miners in other countries, but is a crime to urge our own people to produce more. I will not accept the position that we in Britain are finished, that we are down and out. I believe that the greatest service we can make this week is to state freely and frankly what is wrong, in order that we shall see the honest and right way. It is better, in the interests of our members, to realise that in this changing world those who are charged with the responsibility of leadership should cease to utter those worn out platitudes, shibboleths and slogans of an epoch that is gone, rather than meet the demands of today.

When we come to discuss what changes are needed to provide greater opportunities and improved facilities to those employed in the industry, I

ask you to let us have practical, constructive criticism; it is not sufficient to give voice to purely negative complaints. We do not require outside busy-bodies, who only know our lives at the pit or village from afar, to issue their tons of advice on how things should be done. Over the years of toil, travail and agony, these critics have never ventured nearer a pit than they are today, and we say to them quietly, but firmly, we will, out of our experiences, from our own knowledge, provide the solution, just in the same way and with the same success as we built the movement which today is the inspiration and hope of democrats the world over.

GENERAL ELECTION

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 time and money, and in some cases their lives to the cause. Your tribute to them, the test of your faith is your loyalty, and devotion to Labour's great cause.

(Applause.)