

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

MR. W. E. JONES : It now gives me the greatest possible pleasure, gentlemen, to call upon our President, Sir William Lawther, to give us his presidential address.

Sir William Lawther (*President*)

FELLOW MEMBERS,

It has become to many a mere form of speech to declare that we live in difficult and tragic times. With the rest of the community we share the common difficulties and tragedies that beset mankind in his endeavours to find a way through those upheavals that mar civilisation.

We who belong to this industry have seen tragedy overshadow the British coalfields in the disasters at Knockshinnoch, Creswell and Easington. These major catastrophes, together with another four to five hundred deaths, and the countless thousands of silicosis and pneumoconiosis cases, and the day to day accidents, bring ever before us the terrible price that those who pursue the calling of "Miner" have to pay, in addition to the services they render to their nation. Will those who in moments of anger next grumble about either the quantity or the quality of their coals, remember the cost in human life, suffering and agony it means to the mining community. The miner always

pays in blood. Whatever the other problems that will call for your attention as delegates this week, the causes of these appalling losses of life must be faced, in order to eradicate them, if it be possible for human agencies to do so.

There have passed from our midst since we last met, two men who have in recent years graced this platform; Sir Arthur Street and the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin, M.P. Sir Arthur Street, as Vice-Chairman of the National Coal Board, endeared himself to all who knew him. No man gave more conscientious service to the tasks he was called upon to undertake in the development of nationalisation than Sir Arthur. He died in harness, doing his duty for the industry.

Ernest Bevin, in the rôles he occupied, both in the industrial and political side of the Labour Movement, played a tremendous part in shaping and determining the future of this industry. Those of us who were privileged to know him, know of his greatness. He had a vision of the problems that beset us, and helped to lay a foundation for all who worked within the industry, so that never again would poverty and insecurity be our lot. He walked with us in our demonstrations, he ever marched with us towards the fulfilment of our hopes and aspirations. Miners and their families will ever remember this great soul, who was also a great Englishman. The lines an American wrote of Lincoln could with equal truth be said of Ernest Bevin :

“Oh, Uncommon Commoner ! May your name
For ever lead like a living flame !
Unschool'd scholar ! How did you learn
The wisdom a lifetime may not earn ?
Unsainted martyr ! Higher than saint !
You were a *man* with man's constraint.”

To the relatives of those who have passed in the service of the industry, and of their fellows, we pay our tribute, and to their loved ones, our sympathy in their loss.

When the history of 1951, this year of Festival, comes to be written, then will be revealed a unique event. When the Prime Minister and the Government appealed to you to help your country with an extra three million tons of coal in the early months of the year, we had the usual outcries from the merchants of gloom, mostly outside our ranks, but we had a few insignificant Doubting Thomases inside too, who said that it could not be done. You have given these arch-pessimists the complete answer. **YOU DID GET THE EXTRA COAL.** Maybe the historian who records that fact will also wonder how it has come to pass that although everyone knows we must have coal, and have it more abundantly, we still lack the manpower to get it. The answer to that problem of manpower must be found, otherwise disaster looms not far ahead. Some of our critics seem to believe that it is an eternal truth that the obligation rests upon mining families to provide the miners the industry needs, whilst they and their offspring should have the white collar jobs. Perhaps it would be as well for these intellectual sharp-shooters to realise a simple fact, namely, that twenty-five years ago, if fifty per cent of miners' sons went to the pits, the manpower required was provided; whereas today if one hundred per cent went to the pits, it would not solve the problem.

And as educational facilities develop, that percentage is certainly going to be considerably lower than one hundred per cent. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the Coal Board and the nation to face up to the grim realities. The cause of the decline in manpower in a free society is due to the fact that the industry does not provide the incentives to attract the men needed. Therefore much more attention will have to be paid to the human agency than ever before. The miner of today has in the main shown and proved that he will respond to decent, humane treatment. Your National Executive Committee has reported to you the changes made in a few short years under the new administration, yet there still remains the need for a continuous hold on the most valuable asset in the industry—manpower.

You have before you for discussion the Plan for Coal. The National Coal Board were under an obligation to put forward such a proposal. I am not at this moment arguing whether the Plan is all that we desire, but it is the first attempt that has ever been made in Britain to provide a Plan for this industry. What is going to happen if we are to go back to the planless days, to a similar stage of twenty-five years ago? Remember that era of wickedness, chaos and strife you and your fathers had in an unplanned industry in 1926? You can never forget it. Over the broken homes and derelict areas the mad men ruled. Never again can we, nor will we, go back to that reign of terror; that iron curtain is broken, and we can, if we desire, follow a line of reason.

The Report of the National Executive gives full details of a year of real endeavour to deal with the immediate problem of wages to meet the increasing cost of living. Whatever may be your views on this problem of rising costs in the essentials of life, no one will, I feel sure, believe that there is an easy and simple solution. If the solution lay along the lines of forcing wages to meet the increased living costs, then that would be too simple. It must be self-evident to all, that a process of that kind could be carried to the stage where we should see the utter and absolute collapse of the whole economic fabric, and in the ensuing chaos, the destruction of our civilisation. That would be the atomic bomb solution, bringing the knowledge that we had fired it ourselves.

It is the duty of those who have charge of the administrative machine of Government to take the essential steps, if it be in their power to keep the living costs down. It is common knowledge that the present rise in the cost of living arises largely from the unsettled state of the world. This Labour Government has had to begin re-arming, because of the fact that whilst we in Britain and our American allies had, after the end of the war, begun the movement towards Peace, Russia began to operate in exactly the opposite direction. No one realises more than does the Trade Unionist that whilst it may be easy for him to find a solution, there are thousands outside the Trade Union sphere, like the disabled and aged, who are helpless.

The day has gone by when we can shirk the main issue, namely, that it can be overcome by increased productivity. That is why we have never failed as a Union to place equally as frankly before our members their obligation in the economic sphere. We cannot understand or appreciate the type of mind which eulogises the Stakhanovite in other nations, and sneers at the sloggers in his own pit. We must never reach the stage of ceasing to learn of the

achievements of nations that have higher standards of production than ourselves. An individual, a movement, or a nation that reaches the stage where it cannot be taught anything more is going backward, not forward. That is the diehard Tory position; the modern Canutes whose vision has gone—they have only eyes for yesterday, not for tomorrow. It is because we realise the opposite to that aged and dead outlook, that we welcome the steps taken to learn more about the achievements of those English-speaking Trade Unionists over the other side of the Atlantic. It is considered an advanced outlook in certain circles to sneer at the accomplishments of the United States of America. We want to assure our friends in the U.S.A. that they would be wasting time if they were to spend many moments trying to explain their problems to some of our pseudo-intellectuals. You can have the assurance that the ordinary, average British Trade Unionist has long, long ago given up listening to their vapourings on these and many other questions. Never in our history was there so firm a link, so perfect an understanding and appreciation of the problems that confront us, as exists today between the British and the American Trade Union Movements.

That truth is borne out in the understanding of the attempts made in the last twelve months by the Picasso doves of Peace, to cloud the real issues that confront us in the international sphere. I am very glad the British Labour Government took the steps it did take, to prevent those doves descending upon Sheffield. It saved the natives of that city of steel from having to listen to the stooges running off their records, when we have no doubt that they would have tried to prove that St. George was the Dragon and Uncle Sam was Uncle Shylock. We notice in the list of their Council Members one individual designated therein as a miner, giving the impression that this Union of Miners supports those who have never hesitated to sneer and snarl at the forces of the United Nations fighting aggression in Korea. This Union, that alone can speak with authority for the Miners of Britain, gives no individual authority to speak for a movement run along similar lines to another peace movement in 1940, when the Battle of Britain was being fought. The organised Miners of Britain have never hesitated to give their support, either in treasure or their lives, if needs be, to bring about international understanding, and resist aggression. The records are there to be examined. But we cannot, and will not, accept the position that we as Britishers are always wrong. We do not forget that there was a time when Britain stood alone against aggression, and maybe it is as well for some of our anti-American baiters to realise that the U.S.A. gave us much needed support in our struggle in 1940. They had no pacts or treaties with Hitler, when we were fighting the foul menace of Nazism, and that counted for much in those days, that we will not forget now. Those who indulge in what Andrei Gromyko described as "verbal equilibristics" should remember that others do not desire to pursue such tactics.

And now to an aspect of the industry which grows more serious each year that it remains in existence. I am bound in honour to the pledges we have given, to draw your attention to the fact that despite conciliation machinery at every level, for dealing with any and every dispute, we still have members who indulge in the luxury of unofficial stoppages. Many of these only last

a day, and work is resumed just as before. Often the local Branch Officials do not know about the grievance until the stoppage happens. This is not playing the game, but playing straight into the hands of your worst enemies. On the whole, no other industry, no other trade union, has as its local officials men with a higher conception of service, either civic or industrial, than has our Union. And yet they, too, are ignored, and let down, when these stoppages, which cost over one million tons of coal in 1950 alone, take place. There are many pits which have never indulged in a moment's stoppage—surely it is not an impossibility for the remainder to follow their example.

One last phase of today's problems has to be faced, and that is the present political aspect. We hear and we read of the need for a General Election. The opportunist will ever remain as such; we at least realise that whatever may be the professions of Labour's political opponents, it would spell disaster for the mining industry, if their suggested plans were to materialise. We as miners know from bitter experience what Toryism meant to the miners, and to the mining industry. Let this nation think twice of the fate that awaits it, if the reactionary Tory solutions are applied to this industry. The miners do not want Toryism and the nation cannot afford it. It is our duty to let that fact be known now, so that the terrible consequences can be understood. If anyone should doubt that this might happen, they have only to read the latest ultimatum to this industry from Colonel Lancaster and his friends. They certainly want to go places and at the pace that would create the most trouble in the shortest time. Back, back to the wicked old days, is their slogan. It was from this mad, internecine warfare of colliery against colliery, and district against district, that came the legacy of their mismanagement, which we have not yet left behind, and all they can urge is that we should go back to it again. Our answer is emphatic, we will neither go back to it, nor will we be driven there. And it is therefore the duty of every delegate here, every official, in whatever capacity he functions, not merely to vote Labour, but to work unceasingly for Labour. There is no second choice, there is no alternative—we will either go forward with Labour or backward with Toryism.

Our members have decided by properly conducted democratic methods that the party of their choice, wherein lies their hope, is the Labour Party. It represents their views, and we, in this week in conference, will again have the opportunity of deciding our views on the political issue. Once that decision is taken, then it must be a case of going full steam ahead until the date of the Election, whenever that takes place. We have so much at stake, and the issues are so serious, that it cannot be left to chance. It is no longer possible to evade the cost that would have to be paid if reaction were to triumph. We will not allow it to triumph, we dare not. Therefore from this conference this week, let the call to action, in step with the Labour Party, go forth.

MR. W. E. JONES : Thank you very much, Sir William. It now gives me pleasure to call upon the General Secretary of the Northumberland Area, Mr. Main, to move a vote of thanks to the President for his address.

MR. R. MAIN (Northumberland) : Mr. Chairman and fellow delegates, it is with the deepest sense of appreciation and a high degree of pride that

I accept this honour of speaking a few kind words to our Chairman of this Association. An examination of the President's Address shows that it sets out quite clearly the difficulties besetting our industry. It pays special tribute to those who have gone before, in particular, our Ernest Bevin. It also indicates quite clearly our joint responsibility in a nationalised industry, emphasising the new approach to our industry and the Plan for coal, together with the organised approach to avoid our many difficulties. The President throws our minds into retrospect in respect of the dark days that have gone by, which we hope will not return. He nominates our national difficulties, emphasising, where possible, rearmament is necessary and is not of our own making. The man himself, if I may say so, may not be a diplomat, but his address emphasises, as only Will Lawther can, his democratic approach to the difficulties that beset our industry. To detract from our President rather reminds me of a story of a vicar and a miner. This old miner was digging the vicar's garden, when the vicar eventually came out. He said "You are making a wonderful job of the garden. Is not it marvellous what God and man can do?" The old pitman said to him : "Who did you say there?" The vicar replied : "God and man. Is not it marvellous what God and man can do?" The miner said : "Aye, but you should have seen the — garden when He had it on His own."

Might I read this to Conference? I am requesting that Conference associates itself with my vote of thanks to our President, Sir William Lawther, for having so ably, logically and sensibly pointed out in his address our common duty to ourselves, as mineworkers, and our general duty to the country at large.