

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

MR. W. E. JONES (Vice-President) : May I at this stage in the proceedings with very great pleasure call upon the President to make to Conference his annual Presidential Address. Sir William Lawther.

SIR WILLIAM LAWThER, J.P. (President) :

FELLOW MEMBERS,

In every Address that I have had the privilege of making to you at these Annual Conferences of our Union, I have had to refer to the price our folk pay in providing the coal for the nation in order to live. Not a day passes without someone pays that price with his life, and far far too often there are more than one or two casualties. Might I repeat what has so often been said, let those who grumble at the price they pay in pounds, shillings and pence for their coal, think for one minute in silence of the terrible price in life and limb that our members pay every day. We therefore pay our humble tribute to the memory, of all those who have passed in the service of this organisation, in the hope and faith that the sacrifices they have made will inspire others to a better understanding of their work.

Today, I can say to you fellow delegates, and through you all to our members, that as you will read in the Report of the National Executive Committee, a beginning has been made since we last met at our Annual Conference, towards having placed in the Statute Book, a new Act for greater safety in this important yet still the most hazardous and dangerous occupation. Last year you will remember I said :

“The first consideration in our work must always be the safety aspect. These words should be quite unnecessary; but in this, the twentieth century, which has just commenced its second half, the number who have been killed in this industry is fifty-two thousand three hundred and forty-six, an average of one thousand men and boys each year. That army of men and boys, some of the latter of very tender years, together with the hundreds injured by accident or stricken with industrial disease, should be the lever for an awakening in our ranks of a really intensive drive, as never before, for more and more safety measures.”

Fourteen years ago, I had the honour of delivering my first Presidential Address. The Report of the Royal Commission on Safety in Coal Mines had just been issued, and I should like to draw your attention to the statement that appeared in their Report which I read at the Conference in 1939.

“Remember this terrible indictment of Britain's major industry. 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 one thousand persons employed is fifty 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 eight hundred and fifty, the average annual number of persons so injured as to be off work for three days or more has been over one hundred and thirty-five thousand, and on the average nearly eight thousand persons have contracted each year one of the occupational diseases for which compensation is payable. Each year one person in every nine thousand employed loses his life while at work at the mine and two in every eleven 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 fifteen 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."

That report was issued on December 2nd, 1938, and it is gratifying to note that the fatal accidents are lower today. However, the salient facts remain, that too many lives are still lost and until that state of affairs is eradicated as part of the normal process of this 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, whatever his function or sphere to change that loss of life in this industry.

It is, in my view, essential that everyone should now face up to the developments in this industry. None can avoid their individual responsibility as the consequences are too serious for all concerned with the future. It is now accepted that the only hope for salvation for this nation in the economic sphere lies primary in a prosperous coal industry, giving the country National Service for National Ownership. Those who preceded us were able to lay the foundations for the idea, and by their insistent and consistent propaganda to persuade the British people to change the method of ownership. Unfortunately, too many believed that once the economic change had been made, the only course open for the Union to adopt was to go full steam ahead, making demand upon demand, without regard to the consequences. Yet wherever you look in our country and abroad, whatever may be the political ideology of its rulers or its inhabitants, the simple fact remains, that improvements in the status of those employed only follows by increased efforts. It was the knowledge of this truth that impelled your National Executive Committee to agree that your National Officials, together with the members of the National Coal Board, should visit every part of the coalfields to state frankly that unless there was a more intense appreciation of the need for continued increased production, then the hopes for further improvements would fail. There may be some who would deny this economic truth—that, of course, would be very soothing to those who would prefer the

way that leadeth to destruction. They are of that very select and self chosen company who make themselves believe that results can be obtained without effort. In short, that if you never sow, you are still bound to reap. Any ordinary reasonable human being and, fortunately, they comprise the greater mass of our membership, know this is not true, for there never has, nor will there ever be any production without effort, and without increased production we would still be living in the state that passed reasonably tolerable for those ancestors of ours a long long time ago, but would be neither reasonable nor tolerable today. I can only ask you to note how often you hear and read of the cry for increased productivity in the States of the totalitarian regimes, where a single Party dominated Government is accepted as democracy by those who do not believe in democracy.

Not merely is it essential for trade unionists to understand and appreciate these economic truths, but it is equally vital and essential that all politicians of whatever school of thought or Party they may belong to, should bear it in mind when making their orations for a brighter and better world. Clear and definite thinking on these lines would be more helpful than many of the vapourings that pass muster for political wisdom. If clever speeches and dialectical word spinning could have solved mankind's problems, then we would not be bothered with the stern facts that have to be faced and overcome today, if we are not to relapse into the backward eras our forefathers knew.

Those of us who have spent our lives in this movement know of the terrible price that would have to be paid by our own people if economic collapse were to take place. Therefore, we feel it necessary to say what may be very unpopular things, in order that once again we can occupy as a nation that position that every thinking citizen feels is our historic destiny. But that pathway will not be ours unless we realise it and pursue it with our eyes wide open and cease to use blinkers.

The view that we, as trade unionists, need not be concerned with the economics of our industry is absurd. It is only those who are convinced regarding the truth of our economic position as a nation and are fearless in expressing it, can hope to establish better conditions of service, for those who merit them. It will be of no use passing resolutions to seek or demand those better conditions if we are left without the means to provide today's standards and that is what could happen. If the claim is made and the challenge put forward that we, in Britain, must be free and independent of help from other nations, then there has to be a realisation of the price we shall have to pay for that independence. And that must mean a good deal higher production than we are getting today. To ignore that truth, would be to lead our members astray. I feel we must all pull together now, whilst we still have the chance, rather than indulge in lamentations should disaster overtake us. It is and will be the duty of the Union as it has done over decades, to see that whatever flows from the acceptance of that view, and the increased production that takes place, goes towards giving further improvements to those who make the effort. Not even the most prejudiced critic of the National Coal Board will deny that our good employers have ever hesitated to help by practical methods that are appreciated by those who prefer practices to wild theories, however critical some politicians might be.

This Union has never argued that the inauguration of nationalisation was the end of our troubles, nor do we believe that the National Coal Board is the perfect form of organisation. We are certain that the form of organisation to give absolute confidence, understanding and appreciation of the value of nationalisation, will not be brought about by any investigation of political busybodies, whatever Party label they may wear. It is too absurd to expect normal human beings to accept the judgement of individuals on either the present or the future form of National Ownership of this industry, who have spent their lives opposing and decrying nationalisation. No scientist would accept judgement of the value of his research from someone whose only knowledge of obtaining fire was derived from rubbing two jazz drumsticks together. Yet we, in this industry, are asked to accept crazy gang politicians' ideas of how to run the industry upon whose success Britain's future depends. Far, far too much is at stake, too many lives depend upon it that we just cannot afford to go back to the view that every geographical area, every industrial unit should be on its own. In every sphere of our national life, we have been driven by hard facts to follow the line of centralisation, rather than the opposite way the non-mining critics desire.

The solving of that problem that continually occurs in the history of this industry, namely, the understanding of the human factor, is the stumbling block to those who look for or expect an easy solution to the accumulated ills that nationalisation inherited. It certainly does not lie along the lines of going backward in the organisation of the structure of the industry. It lies in a more intensive educational campaign for development of consultation. It is even more essential that whatever be the form of changes that are needed to give reality to the conception of industrial democracy, then they must be of a character that can be understood by an ever increasing number of those employed at the level where the changes are to be made. There must be no evasion of these essential changes—no excuses of any sort must be accepted for this neglect of duty from anyone in charge of the industry. It is of course, a difficult job to get men to discard the theories they have been taught to be correct, such as two plus two equals four. But it is a good deal more difficult to get practices and theories changed that are looked upon with the same awe as some of our feudal retainers regard their ancient monuments. Even custodians of architectural freaks and monstrosities have to go round with the hat to live in this modern age. We must get this industry away from the stage of hanging on to grievances both ancient and modern. It must be appreciated that as a simple historic truth, no nation has yet solved its mining problems on a basis of free men and we, in Britain, have the opportunity to do so now. Those who realise and accept this should not hesitate to point it out wherever the opposition may come from.

We do not, nor can we accept the slogan swallowers who think they know the solution. Those who claim to know all the answers are too far from the sphere of operations to know the cause or causes of the inherited and acquired problems of this industry. We do not oppose inquiries or investigations because we are afraid. We do however, strongly object to political busybodies of either the extreme left or the extreme right providing an alibi for wasting valuable time and money to gloss over and hide their incompetencies in

the sphere of life they have chosen for themselves, namely, to create the impression that out of the tornado of words they may utter to hide their lack of understanding of the basic needs of the industry in order that they may be accepted as the purveyors of wisdom. This continual criticism seems to be the only source of pleasure and amusement of too many of our politicians and pseudo statesmen and is of no real service to the needs of our nation today. It may be a great solace to them hearing their voices and imagining that they know it all, but it gives neither hope nor inspiration to those who toil in the bowels of the earth.

There are also some other phases of production and efficiency aspects of our industry that have to be understood.

Coal is the source of ninety per cent of the country's fuel and power requirement—and can and does play the most vital part in solving directly and indirectly our economic problems. You will remember the chaos in industry generally in February, 1947, when widespread temporary unemployment was caused by restrictions on the movement of coal due to the weather. And as both Labour and Tory Governments alike have repeatedly told us, we have got to export in order to import. Keep in mind that we rely on overseas supplies for half of our food and the vast bulk of the raw materials used by industry. It does not matter, incidentally, whether we seek to trade with the East or the West, or both (which is what we are trying to do), the problem is much the same—we still have to strike an import/export balance.

As miners, therefore—the working force in our industry—we have considerable responsibilities to the community. We have rights as well, of course, concerning wages and working conditions, in particular, and also the right to be consulted and our advice sought on all matters affecting the coal industry. These rights are not handed to us on a plate, but that merely emphasises the need for strong collective trade unionism. Moreover, insofar as we have responsibilities, it may be that the more earnestly we recognise and give effect to them, the better claim we have to our rights—about which there is nothing absolute.

Needless to say, what industry and the public expect from us is coal—or rather more coal and at a price which reflects a high level of efficiency.

There are a number of ways of getting more coal: we could, the critics declare, work harder, or we could—and do, of course—work longer hours as many thousands work on Saturdays, or we could use more machinery and mechanical equipment, together with improved organisational efficiency—method and motion study in the parlance of the production engineers. And lastly, there is little doubt that considerable quantities of coal could be saved and used to better advantage by industry and domestic consumers if more attention was paid to combustion efficiency. As producers, fuel utilisation is not really our problem, but it does affect us and we cannot be disinterested in developments.

Let me say right away that anyone who thinks we ought—or could for that matter—work harder by putting more physical effort into the job—had better think again. Our people expend ample energy as it is. To increase effort might seriously jeopardise health and safety—and both have special significance in coalmining as the Royal Commission Report has shown. In any case

experience proves that increased physical effort leads very quickly to diminishing returns. Stakhanovites are not noted for their longevity.

There is a world of difference, however, between working harder and working more effectively. No one would seriously contend that a miner with all the modern machinery was working four times as hard as a man using a pick and shovel merely because his output was four times as great! The limited extent and pace at which machinery and powered equipment can be introduced into British coalmining is not, I feel, too well understood, but there need be no doubt where the main source of future increased productivity lies. Capital investment in coalmining expressed in terms of modernisation and development is therefore very important, and it is regrettable that last year's target figures were not achieved. In a sense the longer that investment is delayed—and hence increased efficiency and productivity—the longer, presumably, we shall be asked to continue the Saturday morning shift.

And despite what critics of the trade unions may say, there is no reluctance to accept or try out new machinery. If there had been the same policy adopted at the beginning of this century by those who owned the industry as the National Coal Board does today, namely, not making the introduction of machinery an excuse to reduce the living standards of the men and boys in the industry then you would have had a very different outlook. But every new machine meant no improvement in the standards of remuneration, often it meant the opposite. Today, we look to mechanisation to improve the conditions under which our members work. We have no vested interest in the pick and shovel. There might be arguments about how much should be paid for operating new machinery, but this is a typical problem in any "go-ahead" industry, and should not be beyond the wits of men and management to settle amicably.

Whatever the responsibilities of the Union regarding mechanisation and modernisation, those of management are much greater—if only because the initiative is largely theirs. Moreover, increased mechanisation demands the study of new and better ways of doing jobs, high standards of planning and co-ordination, teamwork and a willingness to consult—in other words, good management. There is, I suggest, plenty of room in British mines for improved managerial efficiency. I would like to think they were participating as fully as possible in, for instance, the activities of the British Institute of Management—of which we, incidentally, are one of thirty-four subscribing trade unions. It is no good anyone saying that the mining industry is different from other industries and that nothing is to be gained by fraternisation. Whatever the industry, there are many factors common to management and production—not least on attitudes of mind—and exchanges of views can be very enlightening.

For this reason I hope both men and management in the coal industry will take part in the activities of the Local Productivity Committees of the British Productivity Council wherever they have the opportunity. As you probably know, the British Productivity Council has been set up by the Trades Union Congress (I am one of their representatives) and the employers' organisation to promote greater industrial efficiency, and over the last few months the Council has embarked on what must be regarded as an ambitious programme.

The formation of Local Productivity Committees, for instance, is being encouraged in over one hundred towns, cities and industrial centres throughout the country. Representatives from all sections of industry, including the trade unions, will thus have opportunities for discussing together production and industrial matters in their localities.

Another development is the organising of the Circuit Scheme. The object here is to get about ten establishments within given areas to form groups and on the basis of home and away fixture lists to undertake interchange visiting by teams six strong made up of representatives from supervisory, technical and operative grades. Again I would make the point that coalmining, despite dissimilarities, has many features in common with other industries and that there is much to be gained by exchanging ideas, points of view and experiences.

In addition to these two major activities the British Productivity Council is also producing a number of films related to increased efficiency and productivity, and it is hoped to start showing them on television and possibly in cinemas in the near future. Altogether the Council has a big job on its hands and its success will depend on the participation in its work by the people in industry, including us.

I referred earlier to fuel efficiency and you may be interested to know that at the time of preparing this speech the possibility of industry taking over the Ministry of Fuel and Power's Fuel Efficiency Advisory Service was being discussed. This service (which was a good one) cost the Government about £350,000 a year, and it was hoped that the Coal, Gas and Electricity Boards would guarantee a substantial proportion of the finance required. Far be it for me to suggest that the Government is pulling a fast one in its anxiety to cut down Government expenditure or that private industry, despite the Advisory Service charges which might be imposed, stands to gain as a result of this beneficent action of the nationalised Fuel and Power industries.

You may think it strange that the National Coal Board should pay out money to help consumers use less coal. The extreme logic of this would be disconcerting to say the least. Fortunately, the whole business is one of margins rather than extremes. The National Coal Board reckons—with much commonsense—that improved coal consumption would make it less necessary to extract coal from uneconomic pits, and high-cost production would be avoided.

I know only too well, of course, that we have members working in such pits. The possible closing down of a pit and the subsequent redundancy is, therefore, a human problem as well as being technical and economic, and you can take it from me that situations of this character receive the most careful consideration by the Union. We do not accept them without examining fully all the facts and consequences. But it is no good trying to solve a problem by pretending it is not there, and the facts indicate that sometimes pits cannot justifiably be kept in operation. It is on record that in one pit if everyone worked for nothing, production costs would still be above average. If we lived on nothing we might work for nothing; in the meantime, however, we are trying to improve our living and working standards, and insofar as these might be jeopardised by uneconomic pits, we must take the broad view.

And in practice we have taken the broad view. There is abundant evidence of the miners' willingness to face up to the realities of industrial development

and changes, and of the contribution they are making to maximise efficiency and output for the benefit of the nation.

It is most vital for members of trade unions to understand and appreciate every development of the industry they are employed in. This is always being urged in the Iron Curtain sphere of operations, and you know the rewards that are handed out to those who do not listen to the voice of the Dictators—nay more—even the Dictators themselves are thrown out of jobs if they do not get the comrades to deliver the goods.

During the past twelve months has shown increased activity of the Miners' International Federation of which I have the honour to be the Honorary Secretary. We have now a total membership of 2,556,153 miners in twenty-three countries, an increase of more than 100,000 members since we last met.

The Miners' International is not merely an office for the collation and distribution of information, although much valuable data has been issued in the past year on Migrant Workers; Conditions of Work of Ore Miners and Dust Diseases. It has to examine and determine the approach of the miners towards collective problems.

Some of the principle subjects which have been dealt with by this organisation have been, the European Community of Coal and Steel, Nationalisation and the Organisation of European Economic Co-operation, for which we have our own Miners' Advisory Committee. This is all being done to increase the standards of living and improve the conditions of work for the miners all over the world. There is an enormous task to be performed, especially, in those parts of the world where the miners have not been able to make that progress which has been accomplished in many countries in Europe. Our greatest task is to assist the miners in the more backward countries, and I am very proud to be able to tell you that a start has been made in that direction. A delegation has already been to Asia; also Mr. R. Williams, M.P., has recently returned from Northern Rhodesia having been sent to represent the African miners at the Arbitration proceedings relating to their wages claim the outcome of which was very successful.

The British miners must, therefore, play a leading part to assist miners in other countries. Their strength and consciousness must be brought fully to bear, not in a passive but in the most active rôle, in order that the problems besetting the miners of the whole world be solved and their hopes and aspirations brought to fruition. And, the Miners' International Federation must remain free from political parties who would order them uphill and down dale to suit the Dictators at any given moment.

Today, we have to face industrial and political problems, both on the home front and internationally that our fathers could not have contemplated. Year after year mankind yearns for peace, but has to arm more strenuously to prevent war. I refuse to subscribe to the doctrine that this nation of ours is always in the wrong, and that our opponents are for ever right. The most amazing fact in this era is that it is only in Britain and the democratic world that men and women can express their view of opposition to the elected Government of the Nation. The facts are there to be seen that in the one party nations, the critics of the party or even of the leaders of the party, travel with monotonous regularity to the prison gates and often to the scaffold. You

know this is only too true, that is why emigrants pursue their way to the West and the South of this hemisphere to find freedom and human happiness. The East and the North are both frozen, one by *man* and the other by nature—the results are the same, ordinary folk cannot reside therein.

I will not attempt to prophesy what may happen internationally during the next few months—I will leave that to those upon whom their Government place their trust. I do know that your hope and mine lies in a united trade union movement of free men and women, firm in the faith of the political party, the Labour Party, which the trade unions brought into being and by their money still keep it alive with its feet on the ground. Others may see the world better by standing on their heads. It was also the trade unions who made and have kept intact the *Daily Herald*, without which we would be without a voice in the greatest newspaper read all over the world. It is the one and only consistent expression of Labour views and ideals. You have got not only to support it, but to give it increased support that will increase still further the influence of your movement, your trade union and your political voice, the Labour Party. The *Daily Herald* is the daily tribune of the movement, and it will continue to give voice to the claims of the people for a real new world.

This will be the last time I shall have the privilege of addressing you as your President at our Annual Conferences as I shall retire next May. I have had the honour of holding this position since 1939 of which I have been very proud. Often it has been my duty to say things that did not qualify for a win in the popularity stakes. But I would have been a poor specimen to have held such a position of trust if I had only uttered those thoughts that were pleasant to the ear. Others may follow that line, but it will not be of any service to their fellow workers.

I was born of Chartist stock. I joined the Union when I received my first pay as a boy nearly fifty-two years ago. I have never in any election supported any candidates other than Labour candidates, neither have I supported blackleg candidates whatever names they masquerade under.

When the time comes to hand over the reigns of office, I shall treasure as long as I live, whatever small part I have played in helping those who have toiled and delved in Mother Earth. The changes that have taken place since 1939 are on record. I would not have the egotism to claim that had I not been in charge they would not have happened. In all humility I can only state that with the help of my fellows, both those who have been with me on the National Executive Committee, and the rest of the membership, I have endeavoured to do what I believed was right, and accept the consequences of my actions. In that spirit I finish this phase of my stewardship in the knowledge that I have seen in my life the whole outlook of my fellows change. This nation now recognises the part the miners have played and are playing in keeping Britain, our island home, with a history of leadership second to none in man's long and arduous uphill fight for those ideals that men and women treasure more than life itself. The men who built this Union, many of whom are forgotten, kept that faith even when all ahead seemed dark as night. With indomitable courage, with a determination that never faltered, they never despaired. I had the pleasure of knowing many of those pioneers, and

it has been a joy to work in the organisation they have built. May you treasure and preserve this, your inheritance, to build an even better Union for those who follow on. (*Applause.*)