

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

MR. F. COLLINDRIDGE (Vice-President): Fellow delegates, it is hardly necessary for me to make any introductory remarks regarding our next speaker. I am sure you are all acquainted with his activities and, of course, with his long association with this National Union of Mineworkers and, prior to that, the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain. It is with pleasure, therefore, that I have to ask the President, Mr. Sidney Ford, to deliver his Annual Address to Conference.

CHAIRMAN: Fellow Members, I am privileged, once again, to address you on the occasion of this, the 18th Annual Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers.

It has been the practice for some years now, for the President to open his Address with a review of the economics of the industry and the problems confronting us in this particular connection. Important as such matters are to us all, I want this morning to refer first, to a matter which I believe is of far greater moment to our members, namely, the need for safer working in this industry.

In my Presidential Address last year, I expressed the view that: "It should not be too much to expect that in this age of scientific achievement the introduction of more efficient methods of mining coal should be accompanied by improved standards of safety and health." It is, unfortunately, the fact, that for the past ten years there has been little or no improvement as far as safety is concerned; but, it is particularly distressing to find that in this year of 1962—National Safety Year—the accident rate, instead of showing a significant downward trend as we all had so fervently hoped, is on the increase.

If our members are neglecting the principles of good mining practice, if they are taking risks, in order to obtain higher production, they must be discouraged from so doing. If management and officials are encouraging the relaxation of safety measures in order to satisfy the demand for increased productivity and lower costs of production, such conduct, in my view, calls for the strongest possible condemnation.

Anxious as I am for higher productivity, and this point I make with all the emphasis that I can muster, I will never condone a situation in which it is secured at the expense of the safety of the workmen.

But I do not regard the drive for higher productivity as being in any way incompatible with our demand for greater safety. I see greater productivity as a consequence of increased efficiency; an efficiently organised pit may not be a completely safe pit—after all, we can never dismiss or ignore the human element—but, of this there can be no doubt, an efficiently organised pit will be a much safer pit in which to work than a pit where the standard of efficiency is below the average.

Later this week, the Chairman of the National Coal Board will be speaking to you. I hope that he will, on this occasion, explain the Board's views on this most urgent problem of safety. I, for my part, shall expect him to make it clear, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the Board are determined to continue their efforts to improve safety; to make it clear that the safety of the men employed in this industry is more important than production and costs,

and that in their work, management, technicians and officials must not allow output and cost considerations to override or influence their judgment where the safety of workmen is involved.

But pronouncements and directives from national level will not in themselves create safer working conditions in the pits. If we are to make mining a safer occupation, management and men must co-operate at pit level and work towards this end.

We must, too, give very deep thought to the question of training and supervision. Are we really satisfied that our training schemes and procedures are keeping pace with the technical changes that are taking place in the industry? Is there sufficient specialised training on the mechanical and electrical side with particular reference to the problems arising from the introduction of new types of machinery and in respect of the changing pattern of work at the face?

As I said 12 months ago, adequate training schemes are indispensable. Whenever new techniques and new machinery are introduced, both workmen and officials should receive instruction and training beforehand, not only in production and maintenance procedures but also in the related matters of safety and health.

The importance of ensuring that the workmen and their representatives at colliery level fully utilise the machinery that has been provided in their interests, much of which has the advantage of statutory cover, cannot be over-emphasised. I would therefore, express the sincere hope that each and every one of you on your return home from this Conference, will give serious and urgent consideration to this matter of safety; that you will take such steps as you deem necessary to bring home to every member, his individual responsibility for ensuring, not only his own safety but the safety of his colleagues employed alongside him.

I want now to turn to the situation in the industry and to some of the more important problems that confront us as representatives of the great mass of the workpeople employed in this industry whose interests we are expected to serve.

Last year I referred, as had my predecessor on a number of occasions before me, to the policy of the Union which is to press upon the Government the need to adopt a national fuel policy designed to secure the maximum use of indigenous fuel and the limiting of unnecessary oil imports.

The details of the Union's policy on this matter are well known to you all and I have no intention today of restating them, except to make the point that we continue to hold the view that the best interests of the nation would be served by the adoption of a policy based on making the best possible use of the valuable indigenous source of fuel that we have underground in this country.

During the four years that have elapsed since we advocated a policy along these lines as the only real solution to the situation which was then developing in the industry, we have convinced all sections of the Labour Movement of the validity of our claim. Unfortunately, in spite of representations which we have made to the Minister of Power, representations by the Trades Union

Congress, and representations by the Parliamentary Labour Party in the House of Commons, the Government has failed to respond.

I also referred last year to the quite unfair financial burdens which the industry has been expected to carry over the years. Here we have, again with the support of the Trades Union Congress, sought Government assistance in order that the industry might be relieved, in part at least, of the crippling financial burdens which have been imposed on it as a result of policies pursued by successive Governments. Some idea of the immensity of these financial burdens can be gained from the fact that whereas the National Coal Board has made an operating profit every year since nationalisation, totalling nearly £275 million by the end of 1961, this has been insufficient to enable the Board to meet interest payments to the Minister of more than £345 million during the same period, with the result, the industry, by the end of 1961, was "in the red" to the tune of nearly £93 million.

Whilst it is too early to forecast the likely outcome of the discussions that are now proceeding between the Ministry and the Board in regard to the industry's obligations within the context of the Government's White Paper on the "Financial and Economic Obligations of the Nationalised Industries," it is, I feel, necessary to emphasise that if the industry is to really benefit, any arrangement made as a consequence of these discussions must certainly go beyond the writing-off of the accumulated deficit. I would urge upon those who are dealing with this matter to take into account and make due allowance for the fact that the planning of the industry and the investment necessary to support such planning was based on the Government's forecasts that the demand for coal would reach 240 million tons by 1965. Unfortunately, in the absence of any national fuel policy, circumstances developed in which the industry was forced to contract in order to equate production with a demand which had proved to be much smaller than had been forecast by the Government. The extra capital which the Board had been forced to invest in the industry on the strength of the Government's estimates is now therefore, having to be carried by a much smaller aggregate production and this, in our view, would justify a substantial reconstruction of the industry's capital.

Only one conclusion can be drawn from the attitude of the Government in regard to the problems of the industry: it is clear that they have no intention of taking action to guarantee for coal a fair and reasonable share of the fuel and power requirements of this country. Clearly, our only hope of Government assistance lies in the return of a Labour Government, but, meanwhile, what should be our attitude? How can we best serve the interests of the members? In the absence of some assistance by the Government along the lines of the policies we have advanced, are we to stand aloof from the problems facing the industry, leaving the Board to shoulder the burden of maintaining this industry at a level which will enable it to offer security and fair conditions of employment to those employed in it; do we, sick with frustration and envy, resort to hurling petty abuse at members of the National Coal Board, or are we to continue to co-operate with the Board in planning and building a better and more efficient industry?

We cannot solve the problems facing us in 1962 by adopting the slogans of the '20s; neither are we likely to advance the interests of the members by

renouncing policies which we helped to pattern and to which we are indelibly committed.

If we are to obtain those reforms and improvements in the conditions of service to which we believe our members are entitled, the industry will have to sell its product and this will have to be done in the teeth of keen competition, particularly from oil.

I am confident we can succeed in doing this.

Those people who are so anxious to denigrate this industry, who are ever ready to emphasise its shortcomings but appear somewhat reluctant to acknowledge its many achievements—indeed at times seem almost embarrassed by its achievements—should realise that the consumption target of 200 million tons set by the National Coal Board has been exceeded over the past 2½ years.

What is more, the coal industry is in a much stronger position today to meet the threat of oil competition. Competition between coal and oil is no longer the one-sided affair that it was five years ago when all the advantages were on the side of oil; when traditional coal markets had been handed over to oil simply because there were insufficient supplies of coal to meet all the demands that were being made by industry, by the public services of electricity and gas and by domestic consumers; when, because for years the function of the Marketing Department of the Board had been the allocation of such limited supplies of coal as was available, the Department was quite unprepared to counter the high-powered salesmanship behind the oil industry.

This has all changed. Today, coal can meet the demands that are being made on it; coal has behind it today, a sales and service organisation which compares not unfavourably with that associated with oil; considerable progress has been made with experiments in the field of fuel utilisation and in the distribution of solid fuels and there is every reason to believe that the progress that has been made by the industry in this connection will, along with the substantial progress that is being made on the side of production, enable coal to hold its own in a situation in which the overall energy consumption in this country is likely to continue to increase.

But, and here I really must issue a word of warning, even the adoption of a national fuel policy along with substantial concessions in relation to the finances of the industry would not relieve us of the need to face the consequences of reorganising and modernising this industry.

Since long before nationalisation this Union has campaigned for a more efficient coalmining industry and you will remember that the first item of the Miners' Charter framed in 1946, was a call for "the modernisation of existing pits and the sinking of new ones as rapidly as possible, whilst strictly observing as a minimum, the standards laid down in the Reid Committee Report." The Minister of Fuel and Power (Rt. Hon. Emanuel Shinwell, M.P.), replying to the Union in regard to this particular item in the Charter, emphasised that this was the declared policy of the Government; that "reorganisation of the industry, as was foreshadowed by the Reid Report," was "the essence of the scheme of nationalisation." And, of course, it is the fact that as an organisation we are committed by agreement with the National Coal Board to "co-operate fully in promoting the modernisation and reorganisation of the industry."

If modernising and reorganising the industry meant anything, it certainly meant something more than the closure of collieries when reserves of coal were exhausted; it meant, in the ultimate, the concentration of coal production on a lesser number of larger and more efficient collieries; it meant, as was explained by the Minister (Rt. Hon. Emanuel Shinwell, M.P.), the elimination of uneconomic units and it meant, as we ourselves acknowledged in the Miners' Charter, that the manpower requirements of the industry as it was modernised, would "tend to fall."

Are we to claim now that the policies that have been pursued by the Union over the years in this connection, with your approbation, were wrong?

I am convinced that they were basically sound and, in spite of the frustrations and disappointments that we experience from time to time, worthy of your continued support; in this connection I would remind you of the advice of the National Executive Committee as approved by Conference in 1958, which was as follows:

"We cannot disregard the importance, even in present conditions, of doing our best to ensure the greatest degree of efficiency and co-operation. It is in this spirit that we must urge the Board's reciprocal co-operation, for the Union has a responsibility it cannot and will not ignore for maintaining, and wherever possible for improving, the standards of its members and their families."

We must at all times seek to ensure that the Board in implementing its policies does so with consideration and concern for the effect they may have on the mining communities and individual men and women who live in these communities, and in this connection I commend for the consideration of the Board a passage from their own "Revised Plan For Coal" which reads:

"Coal reserves must, in the Board's view, be husbanded notwithstanding the development of other sources of energy. Moreover, in all the established coalfields, round almost every colliery, there are houses and shops and schools—whole communities—whose reason for existence is the local colliery. All collieries must eventually die, but the decision to end the life of one of them prematurely must not be taken without regard to the effect on the community and the social assets dependent on or associated with it."

We must continue to press upon the Government the need for a fair and proper distribution of industry throughout Great Britain and particularly the need to ensure that new industries are established in those localities where, because of reorganisation or the closure of a pit or pits, there will be fewer jobs available in the coalmining industry.

The Board, anxious as they must be, as custodians of this industry, to ensure its satisfactory progress, could, in my view, do more to assist those mineworkers who are willing to transfer to areas where the Board can offer them long-term coalmining employment. Whilst eventually the transfer may offer an advantage to the men concerned, there will be many cases of men who will have to face some immediate or temporary reduction in their earnings as a consequence of the transfer; the Board, in these circumstances, could, I feel, do far more to assist; they should be far more generous in their transfer allowances and in regard to the conditions under which men qualify for them,

Another aspect of this problem which in my view warrants very careful and immediate reconsideration is the special position of certain categories of workmen who are rendered redundant, and here I have particularly in mind, first, the workman who is incapacitated through injury or industrial disease suffered as a consequence of his employment in this industry and who, because of this, must inevitably experience very great difficulty in obtaining other work, and secondly, the workman who has reached an age at which after many years loyal service to this industry he will find it almost impossible to obtain alternative employment.

This problem of redundancy and the treatment of workmen who through no fault of their own find themselves the victims of circumstances, presents the Board with a great opportunity to act in accordance with the broadest interpretation of their responsibility to "conform to the standards of a model employer." I hope they will take it.

Looking to the future, I see no reason for despair. The coalmining industry today is far better equipped after 15 years of nationalisation to face the demands that will be made on it. An increase in productivity of more than 8½ per cent as compared with 12 months ago has meant that during the first 24 weeks of this year, with between 19,000 and 20,000 less men employed in the industry, we have produced some 4 million tons more than during the corresponding period of last year. Another most encouraging current feature of the industry is the improvement in juvenile recruitment which so far this year has been the highest for five years.

Entitled, however, as we are to enthuse at the overall picture, we are not unmindful of the very grave difficulties that confront our members in some of the older coal-producing areas where in addition to the problems of age they are having to face the consequences of the failure of the Government to sustain the industrial economy of this country as well as its failure to encourage a fair distribution of industry throughout the British Isles.

I can understand the wish of the Board to bring about a state of viability in this industry, but the rate of progress towards this end should be conditioned by the necessity to mitigate the social consequences of the policies followed by the Board.

The success of nationalisation cannot be measured solely by the state of the Board's balance sheet; important and, indeed, essential as it is to move towards a state of affairs in which the nationalised coalmining industry is self-supporting, viability achieved at the cost of some thousands of unemployed mineworkers would not redound to the credit of the Board. What is more, for the Board to adopt such a policy would be tantamount to a wanton disregard of the principles which guided the Labour Minister of Fuel and Power (Rt. Hon. P. J. Noel-Baker, M.P.) who, in approving the National Coal Board's proposals for the reconstruction of the industry—which it is worthy of note were drawn up on the basis of the industry being able to meet its obligations by 1965—made it clear that "the rate at which the plan is executed . . . must necessarily depend upon . . . employment and social considerations."

Let there be no misunderstanding about this: any rejection of this fundamental principle by the Board would in my view, call for the most urgent

and drastic action by any future Labour Government in order to eradicate the harmful effects of any inconsiderate policies followed by the Board over the coming months.

But, I believe, with goodwill on the part of both the Board and the Union, and a mutual recognition and understanding of the problems that face the industry, it will be possible to bring about the great changes that we are all agreed are so necessary for the future well-being of the industry and those employed in it, with the minimum of hardship.

I hope that our joint efforts in the future will be directed towards this end.

As your President, I have the responsibility of ensuring that the business of the Union is conducted in a proper manner and according to the rules, and that in the conduct of affairs of the Union the rules are duly and properly carried out.

It is, therefore, with grave concern that I note a recent decision of an Area Council when it declared its "intention to reserve the right to make decisions on industrial action in the future." Having regard to the constitution of the Union no representative body within an Area of the National Union is competent to take such a decision. Resolutions couched in such terms point to either a shocking ignorance of the principles on which this Union was established, or a deliberate intent to challenge the constitutional procedures which have been approved and adopted within the Union.

It is, to say the least, a little surprising that 17 years after the formation of the Union we find such confusion of thought, particularly amongst responsible representatives, and in order to avoid any misunderstanding in the future I want to take advantage of this opportunity to remind you of the basic principles underlying the formation of the National Union. The scheme on which the rules of the National Union of Mineworkers are based, provided for, amongst other things, the industrial activities of the separate district associations as we knew them prior to 1945, "to become the responsibility of the National Union."

The representatives of the Union within an Area, i.e. Area officials, Area delegates and representatives and Branch officers and committees, are in respect of all matters (except the administration of Area and/or Branch funds) subject to the authority of the National Union; consequently any cessation of work in defiance of, or without the authority of, the National Executive Committee, would be unofficial.

There need be no dubiety or misunderstanding as to the authority of the National Union as it is at present constituted; the position has been explained on many occasions in the past and I cannot do better than to quote the words of an ex-Official of the Union, who in 1947 reminded the Annual Conference, "We are forgetting that we are now a National Union of Mineworkers . . . there is an entire change in the British coalfield today. We are no longer policy-making bodies in our Areas, this now being done by the National Union."

In the field of national politics, the coming months could well prove to be decisive for the Labour Party.

For 11 years now this country has been under Tory rule. During this

period successive Conservative Governments have deliberately and consistently manipulated the country's economy in order to produce a series of recessions followed by limited periods of industrial expansion, the latter being timed to coincide with the immediate pre-General Election periods. Once again the country is experiencing the harmful effects of this Tory strategy.

The industrial recession of 1957/58 which contributed to the serious fall in the demand for coal with the consequent contraction of the coalmining industry, was followed by an upsurge of industrial activity in 1959—General Election boom year. This boom, however, was quickly stabilised and for the past 18 months, once again the country has been experiencing an industrial depression. Many factories and industrial plants have been working at only 70-80 per cent capacity with the result, industrial production has remained practically stationary for the past 18 months or so.

The burden of the Government's failure to encourage economic expansion has fallen on those least able to bear it; the complete unfairness of the Government's Incomes policy with its immoral discrimination against the lower paid workers and public servants, whilst at the same time bestowing substantial benefits on those in the surtax category, including landlords and speculators, has clearly roused large sections of the British public in opposition to the Government.

The results of recent by-elections and local council elections are an indication of the public's dissatisfaction with the present Tory Government, but votes registered against the Government by way of protest will not be enough. Our task above everything else is to convince the great mass of the British electorate that we are fit to govern.

I share the view of the Rt. Hon. Hugh Gaitskell, M.P., that we stand in a stronger position today than at any time since 1945. Let us not, therefore, continue to dissipate our strength in needless argument and disputes, which in the past have so often been inspired and fomented by people who owe an allegiance not to the Labour Party, but to another political party which at the next General Election will be sponsoring parliamentary candidates against those of the Labour Party.

In 'Signposts for the Sixties' we have the Party's blue-print for dealing with the major domestic problems facing the British people; set out in this programme is the Labour Party's policy in respect of planning and economic expansion, the land and how it should be used in the interests of the people, social security, equal opportunity for all in the field of education and fair taxation; we have, too, our agreed policies in respect of defence and international problems.

Let us now concentrate on convincing the British electorate that the Labour Party offers the only responsible and real alternative to the already discredited and decrepit Tory Government.