

Saturday, 6th July, 1996.

## (MORNING SESSION)

IN THE CHAIR - MR. FRANK CAVE,  
(VICE-PRESIDENT, NATIONAL UNION OF MINeworkERS)

### **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

CHAIRMAN: Thank you, comrade. I now invite the President to present his annual address to Conference.

THE PRESIDENT: Chairman, colleagues. Last year – 1995 – we saw our mining industry privatised after nearly half a century of public ownership.

The most efficient, most productive deep-mine coal industry in the world has been sold off to private enterprise – not for any sensible reason, but because the Conservative Government wanted to achieve the “ultimate privatisation”, irrespective of the costs involved.

We are now learning of the price the nation has paid for that “achievement”.

The National Audit Office report on the sale of British Coal's mining operations which appeared in April this year reveals that the Government not only sold the mining industry for a "knock-down" price of £954 million – but it accepted responsibility for £2 billion of historic debt, and "wrote off" £1.6 billion in interest and debt repayments.

In other words: in return for a "knock-down" price of only £954 million the Tory Government paid out £3.6 billion in direct and indirect help to the new private owners of what was a publicly owned industry vital to Britain's long-term energy needs.

To compound this "daylight robbery", the Government – according to the Audit Office report – expects to receive some £2 billion out of actuarial surpluses generated by the coal industry's two Pension Funds!

In their attempt to destroy us, they have been prepared to throw Britain's interest to the wind.

Their waste and abuse and destruction of our energy resources is a tragic example of their vendetta against the NUM.

This waste and abuse is epitomised by the collapse of Coal Investments Ltd. which had been proclaimed a saviour for pits already closed.

We should remember that these pits, including Markham Main, Annesley/Bentinck, Silverdale and Hem Heath, were not only profitable within Britain's nationalised coal industry, but have massive reserves of coal.

## **ENERGY POLICY**

Britain's energy industries today represent an exercise in waste, false economies and long-term environmental pollution.

The nuclear industry – protected and looked after by successive Governments – is itself currently up for sale.

This is an industry which is so dangerous and inefficient that the Government is offering incredible inducements to private enterprise to buy off this "nuclear" nightmare.

The Tories will not be selling off the Magnox reactors, because no one in his or her right mind would dream of taking over this horrendous liability, with all its attendant running and decommissioning costs!

At the time of the 1992 pit closure crisis, nuclear power was 350% more expensive than electricity generated by British Coal.

Today it is more than 400% more expensive – although the real costs are still being "hidden" by a Government that continues to try to convince the electorate that nuclear-produced electricity is cheap!

But the Government's abuse of our energy resources doesn't stop there.

Coal imports – costing Britain millions of pounds a year on its balance of payments – are still being brought in even though it costs 25% more to import coal than use indigenous deep-mined coal.

Limited gas and oil reserves which should be kept for specialist use are being squandered – generating electricity 40% more expensive than coal to serve the Tories' political ends.

Any serious energy analyst knows that Britain needs an integrated energy policy: a policy which is environmentally acceptable, efficient and which uses our natural resources for the benefit of future generations.

We need a policy which will phase out all nuclear power, and electricity generation from limited North Sea gas reserves and stop the importation of French electricity which is heavily subsidised.

Britain needs a policy that would put an end once and for all to the heavily subsidised coal imports that have been used to destroy our industry and affect the long-term economic well-being of the nation by adding to our balance of payments problems.

We need an integrated energy policy based on indigenous deep-mined coal, clean-coal technology, conservation, renewable energy sources such as wind, wave, tide, geothermal and solar power, and conservation.

Against the backdrop of the Tory war against our Union and our industry, mineworkers and the NUM have also had to contend with attacks on wages and conditions.

## **WAGES**

Britain's miners – including members of BACM, NACODS and the breakaway UDM as well as the NUM – have not been able to negotiate pay and conditions for the past five years.

The basic pay “increase” of 3.2% imposed by RJB Mining on January 1st, 1996, represents a decrease in real terms – particularly with the increase in overtime worked, and the extension of hours, especially at those pits where mineworkers have no protection under a TUPE Agreement.

This is clear when account is taken of the increase in overtime and increase in incentive pay.

RJB Mining – which bought up 80% of the British coal industry in 1994 – refused from the start of privatisation to accept collective bargaining or agree a Conciliation Scheme with our Union.

Now RJB has terminated all conciliation agreements with BACM, NACODS – and even the Tory Government's favoured breakaway UDM.

Such is the reward for those unions and breakaways which supported the Tories against the NUM at the time of the 1984/85 strike.

When the Tories had finished using them, they discarded them, and now regard them with utter contempt.

Meanwhile, our Union has continued its long struggle to protect our members' jobs, their conditions, trade union rights and basic pay.

A year ago, the High Court and Court of Appeal ruled against the NUM's 83.4% ballot mandate for strike action on wages.

Earlier this year, in February, we again balloted our members, with a recommendation for strike action – if necessary – on wages and trade union rights at RJB-owned pits.

Unfortunately, miners voted 60-40 against selective 24-hour strikes. We should, however, remember that the 40% “Yes” vote not only reflects a high proportion of

opposition to the tactics of private employers, but is a vote approximately the same as that which elected the last British Government!

There are a number of understandable reasons for that vote, including management intimidation, and possibly a climate of fear that has settled to some extent throughout the coal industry.

Many of our members think that things will somehow get better without our having to fight every step of the way to win back decent basic wages and trade union rights including a Conciliation Scheme.

The NUM's leadership whilst respecting our members' February decision against action nevertheless believes that it was a wrong decision.

We shall continue to campaign to win a Conciliation Scheme and collective bargaining rights for all our members irrespective of the numbers involved at any pit or unit, and no matter where they work in the British coalfield.

I believe we have no option but to continue building our Union as a campaigning force: a force that has been attacked and attacked time after time over the years – but a force that has survived.

The Tories have not succeeded in destroying the NUM, and it is up to all of us to build on our victory in surviving the most savage onslaught ever mounted against a British trade union.

Since privatisation, one coal company and one outside contract firm have recognised the NUM and agreed a conciliation scheme and collective bargaining with us.

Unfortunately, these two firms are the exception rather than the rule.

But we always knew that one of the Tories' aims in privatising the industry was to get rid of trade unionism.

It is interesting to note that during and since the campaign for strike action prior to the ballot, the NUM's membership increased by 15%. We should remember this fact particularly at a time when other Unions and the TUC have seen their memberships decimated.

Mineworkers return to the NUM not least because they recognise that only a fighting union will campaign and work round the clock to serve their interests effectively.

For the sake of our members and the interests of the coal industry, we need to build an effective fight for a four-day working week, the elimination of overtime, and retirement on full pay at the age of 50.

The NUM must make clear its determination to secure the same salary arrangements as apply to senior management in our industry!

If non-productive staff can have a guarantee of a salary, then the security of that guarantee must be right for those who produce the coal.

There is no reason why we should not see a basic salary of £40,000 for faceworkers – a salary which is but a fraction of the massive amount paid to Richard Budge, and infinitesimal when compared to the enormous profits recorded in our industry over the past year.

If these aims sound excessive to any one, we should remind the critics that our call for a wage of £100 a week was once considered outrageous by both Government and a hysterical media!

In fighting for our members' pay, terms and conditions, our Union has had success with two major legal actions over the past year.

The first was in establishing unfair dismissal by an agency which had effectively taken over the Barnsley Road Transport Department in Yorkshire from British Coal. The Industrial Tribunal ruled completely in the Union's favour – and as a result we are now pursuing cases for compensation damages on behalf of 40 other members in the County Courts.

Every such victory is important not only for our members but for the trade union Movement as a whole. Job losses and victimisation have swept through every industry and craft over the past decade.

Each success is part of rebuilding confidence in ourselves and the justice of our struggle.

The second win we had was in the long, long battle to achieve recognition of equal value for women colliery canteen workers.

In May, the House of Lords ruled that nearly 1,300 women who are NUM members have the right to have their pay compared with male surface workers employed at collieries in occupations such as baths attendants, laundry workers and maintenance staff.

The NUM first raised issue of equal pay in 1977, nearly 20 years ago, and the present litigation has gone on for over a decade.

The case has been through the Industrial Tribunal, the Employment Appeal Tribunal and the Court of Appeal. Now, at last, the House of Lords has dismissed British Coal's arguments against the principle of work of equal value on the grounds that it has a discriminatory effect and is against a European Court decision.

If British Coal refuses to sit own with the Union and negotiate an agreement on all the matters involved, then the Law Lords have ruled that the cases must be evaluated and determined by a Tribunal-appointed independent expert.

The Law Lords also ruled that British Coal must pay all the Union's costs in this long-running battle over the equal pay for work of equal value.

We have, of course, had to fight on many fronts.

Alongside wages, job protection and proper trade union recognition, are the intertwined issues of safety and health. On this vital front, too, we must continue building ourselves as a campaigning force.

## **SAFETY AND HEALTH**

Through strong trade unionism, Britain's nationalised coal industry achieved the highest standards of mines safety and health in the world.

Those standards, under attack ever since the Tories came to power in 1979, have deteriorated even more dramatically since privatisation.

This is evidence in a provisional report from the Health and Safety Executive, covering the first year after privatisation.

HSE figures show that while the total for all reported injuries remains about the same, serious reportable accidents have increased by nearly 18% - and fatal accidents have risen by 150%!

In spite of this appalling trend, we have just learned that RJB Mining is to end bilateral safety meetings with the NUM.

Even British Coal acceded to bilateral safety discussions!

Could it be that the NUM – by its determined and insistent probing of major incidents such as the Bilsthorpe roof-bolt disaster, or the Point of Ayr major roof-bolt incident, together with the inrush at Thoresby and major falls at Asfordby – is causing embarrassment to Richard Budge?

In any event, it would appear that despite an undertaking to hold bilateral safety meetings with the NUM the Company is now renegeing on its promises.

Privatisation means that our members are now in a working environment where there is intense pressure on them not to report accidents.

At Maltby Colliery in Yorkshire, for example, a contract firm issued a memo warning that: "Accidents will be monitored and those that have a reputation of accidents will no longer be welcome at Maltby"!

One of our main tasks must be to resist and overcome this climate of intimidation.

The last year has, however, seen a marvellous High Court victory for the Union in respect of Vibration White Finger cases, and thousands of claims are currently being processed.

The action was led by the NUM's Standing Counsel, John Hendy QC, who presented a brilliant case.

There has been a move towards greater justice for the multitude of people suffering from bronchitis and emphysema, and while any improvement is welcome, this is not nearly enough.

Our Union must reaffirm its pledge to ensure that any miner suffering from pneumoconiosis, silicosis, bronchitis, emphysema or any other respiratory disease is paid the wages he would have earned had he been able to continue working, together with a substantial compensatory lump sum award.

Whilst fighting for proper compensation for all our sick or injured members, whether retired or still in the industry, we must, however, remember that high standards of health and safety must and can be achieved – in an industry taken back into public ownership and managed for the welfare of the many, not the profits of a few.

Yet another vital issue on which this Union has been involved in a long struggle is that of mineworkers' pensions – and the management of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme.

## **MINEWORKERS' PENSION SCHEME**

We have always argued that occupational pension funds should be managed on behalf of contributors and beneficiaries, and our determined stand has led to a number of battles with the State over the past 12 years.

But we believe the principles are of such fundamental importance that we cannot give in on this, no matter how great the pressure or threats against us.

For example: only a fortnight ago, British Coal brought a major libel action against the NUM Yorkshire Area and an individual NUM leader, Ken Capstick, alleging that an article printed in the "Yorkshire Miner" in 1992 was libellous.

The "Yorkshire Miner" had carried Union comments that British Coal had "stolen" miners' pensions by "taking" £450 million of the MPS surplus in 1992.

British Coal has not paid one penny into the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme since 1989 – although miners have had to continue paying their 5.25% each week – and the decision to "take" £450 million out of the 1990 actuarial surplus in the form of a contribution holiday means that the Corporation and its successor – which is the Government! – will pay no monies into the MPS until the year 2000.

Our Union has consistently pointed out that there is no difference in a character like Robert Maxwell stealing £450 million from Mirror Group pension funds and an employer like British Coal "taking" £450 million in the form of a contribution holiday.

The effect is the same: monies that could and should be used to improve pensions have been used, instead, to improve the profitability of a company's balance sheet.

After five days in the High Court, the Judge struck out British Coal's case. He accepted our argument that the Corporation was an "arm" of government and therefore could not sue for libel, as that was an attack on any citizen's right to freedom of expression.

British Coal's libel action against the NUM was dismissed, with costs awarded to the Union. It is anticipated that the total costs of this case will exceed £500,000 – at least half of which will have to be paid to the NUM.

This outcome was not only a dramatic blow for freedom of speech but a great vindication of the Union's principled stand on an issue which is so important to our members and their families.

This was a tremendous, deeply satisfying victory.

The NUM has repeatedly made clear that it regards all monies in the Pension Scheme as deferred pay.

We believe that all monies in pension schemes – including actuarial surpluses – should be used for one purpose, and one purpose only: to pay for the pensions of members of those schemes.

It is time that there was a firm commitment from "New Labour" that all pension schemes belong to their members and that all trustees must be members of the pension schemes for which they are responsible.

## **UNEMPLOYMENT AND ANTI-TRADE UNION LEGISLATION**

We should never forget that every attack made on our members, our industry and our Union has been part of a strategy carefully put together by our class enemies.

In order to weaken the entire trade union Movement, the Tory Government over the past 17 years has employed a twin-track plan.

It has introduced economic policies which have led to mass unemployment, creating a "climate of fear" with 40 or 50 people chasing every job vacancy.

At the same time, it has systematically introduced eight separate segments of anti-trade union legislation, which not only violate the United Nations' Charter, Article

Number 8 and ILO Conventions 87 and 96 – but also take away the right of trade unionists to organise collectively. The law in Britain denies workers the right to strike.

This legislation is a denial of human rights, and every single piece of it must be repealed.

But we will not secure the repeal of these laws unless the entire trade union movement is prepared to fight – as it has done before, in the 1930s and in 1971 against legislation which was remarkably like that which we have in place today.

It is interesting to compare the compliance and collaboration with the State shown by the British Trades Union Congress with events in Europe, where in the past year we have seen general strikes in Spain, Italy and France.

In Germany there has been mass industrial action, and employers and Government alike are now threatening to end the much-vaunted “co-determination policy” which they have long claimed was the backbone of their “good industrial relations policy”. So much for Masstricht and the Social Chapter!

The challenge for trade unionists and Socialists around the world is how to build an effective opposition to global capitalism, after the events of the past decade.

In Britain, we also face the challenge of rebuilding the Labour and trade union Movement itself.

## **POLITICAL SITUATION**

The dramatic changes that have taken place in the Labour Party over the past year highlight the task before us.

“New Labour’s” has now moved so far to the right that it is indistinguishable from the Democratic Party in the United States, the Social Democratic Party in German – or even the Tories and Liberal Democrats here in Britain.

“New Labour” has not only abandoned Clause IV and its commitment to common ownership, but also made clear its opposition to Socialism.

It now openly supports the concept of Capitalism and the principle of the “free market”. “New Labour” has made clear that its policy is to run a free-market economy more efficiently than the Tories!

“New Labour’s Constitution and its support for the “free market” run completely contrary to the Constitution of our Union, with its clear-cut demand for the abolition of Capitalism and the establishment of a Socialist system of society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

Only Socialist policies hold the key to transforming our battered economy and unstable society.

The NUM must reaffirm its demand that the mining industry be taken into public ownership, with not one penny paid in compensation to those private owners who have been “given” millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money.

We should also make clear our determination to see all the pits which have been closed re-opened together with the development of new coalfields, because only in that way can an integrated energy policy become a reality.

At a time when we have in real terms over seven million people of employable age without a job, and 20% of all households in Britain have no wage earner, it is

imperative that our Union, our Movement and our class fights for policies that will end the scourge of unemployment.

With hundreds of thousands of jobs wiped out by Capitalism, our youth are condemned to lives without work, whilst older men and women have been robbed of the jobs they should have had for life.

Yet, unemployment can be resolved literally overnight – provided we implement Socialist policies.

This means a firm commitment to introduce a four-day working week without loss of pay; a ban on all non-essential overtime; and the offer of voluntary retirement on full pay at the age of 55.

These three measures would not only eliminate unemployment, but would give jobs to hundreds of thousands of young people who face a life of helplessness, and who regard themselves, rightly, as part of the dispossessed in our society.

In Britain today we spend over £50 billion maintaining unemployment, when commonsense tells us that we should be spending that money on creating employment.

It is time the trade union Movement also made clear its determination to save our National Health Service, and salvage the education system and social services.

It is time for us all to reiterate our commitment to the principle of care for everybody “from the cradle to the grave”.

We should be campaigning not only for fundamental economic change but for the social and environmental transformation of this society.

With so much life on this planet already destroyed, we want an end to the pollution of our land, rivers, sea and air.

Towards that end we need not only an integrated energy policy but an integrated transport policy.

Cars, lorries and coaches contribute over 20% to the “greenhouse effect” that has devastated the Earth’s ecology.

We should be fighting for a strategy that balances rail, canal and road transport, and stop the insane development of new motorways which destroy our environment even further.

Such needs can only be met if our key industries and services – including water, electricity, telecommunications, gas, the railways and coal – are taken back into public ownership and control.

The trade union and Labour Movement should be campaigning alongside all the “single issue” protest groups that have led the fight against motorway developments, nuclear power and for animal rights.

We must associate ourselves with all those who represent the dispossessed including our fellow citizens who are literally without a home and without a hope.

We must associate ourselves with all those who oppose the evils of racism, sexism and ageism – and help to stop this alienation in society.

## **INTERNATIONAL**

We know that the problems we face are part of an international crisis, a crisis that is steadily getting worse.

Our Union has always been to the fore in its support for those who suffer as a result of global Capitalism.

We should not only speak out but actively campaign against the trade embargoes and sanctions deployed against the people of Iraq, or people in the former Yugoslavia.

Our Union has a proud history of practical solidarity with the fledging Soviet Union in the 1920s, Republican Spain in the 1930s and the peoples of Europe at the time of the Second World War.

In more recent times we have condemned the invasion of the Falkland Islands – the Malvinas, and the mass invasions of the Middle East, brought on by determination to preserve oil supplies for the West.

We have seen the hypocrisy of governments that use the rhetoric of “freedom” and “democracy” to condemn Iraq whilst supporting a nation like Saudi Arabia which has one of the worst human rights records in the world.

It is part of our responsibility as trade unionists to condemn and campaign against that hypocrisy.

## **CUBA**

Above all, we should speak out and campaign – as our forebears did defending the Spanish Republic 60 years ago – by declaring our total support and commitment to the island of Cuba, which struggles to maintain its Socialist society against a vicious trade blockade imposed by the United States.

Our Union is in the forefront of mobilising support for Cuba, and we have taken a lead in organising and sending containers full of aid and supplies to our brothers and sisters there.

No-one has played a more valiant role in this than our National Vice-President, who has worked so unstintingly that the very name of the NUM has become synonymous with support for Cuba, here in Britain and throughout the world.

## **IRELAND**

We must firmly declare our support for a peace process in Ireland – but it must be a peace process that brings real peace that island which has seen so much bloodshed over the past 50 years – indeed, over the centuries.

Real and lasting peace, however, can only become a reality if this island – artificially partitioned by the British Government – once again becomes a united Ireland.

Our trade union heritage – which we should cherish – teaches us that division leads to nationalism and fascism. It provides a breeding ground for intolerance, hatred, repression, racism and violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we go towards the twenty-first Century, it would be so easy to sink into depression – to be paralysed by fear of the “technological revolution”, and the effects of mass unemployment.

It is all too easy today to fall into Capitalism's trap, and to feel we should look after ourselves as individuals, turning our backs on the communities we come from.

Above everything else, our Union and our Movement must regain the spirit of community; we must rebuild that sense of belonging, and feeling that each struggle against oppression is our struggle.

It is because of our history that we fought alongside the printworkers at Warrington and at Wapping, and today stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Liverpool dockers whose only crime has been refusing to cross a picket line.

None have struggled harder for trade union principles than the members of our Union, together with the magnificent Women Against Pit Closures who, 12 years after the miners' strike are still campaigning – not only for the rebuilding of our industry, and in support of other workers in struggle, but for a better world and a Socialist society.

I believe I have good reason to remain an optimist, a Socialist whose vision of the future is undimmed and undaunted by the setbacks and retreats we have seen over the past few years.

I am proud to be a member of the National Union of Mineworkers, a Union which has become an international symbol of resistance, a Union whose refusal to give in has inspired millions of people not only in Britain but throughout the world.

It is the spirit of resistance and determination which will eventually see the working people of Britain rally to that central part of our Union's Constitution which calls for the abolition of Capitalism and the introduction of Socialism based on the concept of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.  
*(Applause)*