

## **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

THE PRESIDENT: Comrades, this is the first time that the National Union of Mineworkers has held its Annual Conference in Barnsley. I suppose in many ways it is significant that the Conference takes place in the heart of the coalfield, but probably even more significant is the fact that we meet in a Miners' Headquarters which was probably the first Trade Union Headquarters ever built anywhere in Britain. They were fed up of being thrown out of public houses, evicted by landlords who did not like their policies, prevented from hiring rooms and having to operate from inadequate facilities. They certainly did not want to be controlled by authorities (even though they may be called the Charity Commission) so they decided to build the Miners' Office here in Barnsley in 1874, 124 years ago. The man who built it was a man called John Normansell, the first working man in the history of the Labour

and Trade Union Movement elected as a councillor. Until that time it was not possible for anyone to be elected unless they had a certain amount of money in their bank account. The miners decided not only would they build this tremendous headquarters, but they would also put a deposit in Normansell's own bank account so they could have a voice in the echelons of the local authority, and eventually they hoped the echelons of parliament itself.

I say, Chair, today as I speak it would do well for any people to remember that they represent the working class of Britain, in parliament and in the local authorities, because of people like Normansell who built these headquarters 120 years ago and who fought for representation on local councils and in the House of Commons.

For reasons beyond my control this may well be the first time in 25 years that I have presented a presidential address that has not been previously prepared, but it is at least a presidential address that will come from the heart and with figures that will be as accurate as those that have been given over the past 25 years.

One year ago the new Labour Government of Tony Blair was elected and for many people in Britain it not only signalled the end of 18 years of Tory misrule but it held out the hand, the possibility, that after all those years of constant, incessant attack there would be an opportunity to transform Britain's economic, industrial and political landscape. Last year I warned that New Labour would carry on with the same policies as the previous Tory Government. I explained that in my view it would be a government of class collaboration, compromise and subservience to the IMF and international capitalism, a government whose aim I explained would be to run capitalism better than the Tories. I apologise to no one for stating what I believe and above all reminding members what is contained in our own Rule Book, the abolition of capitalism and establishment of socialism.

Last year it was a prophecy, it was a projection; this year tragically it is a fact. You do not have to listen to me. On television recently it was explained by Ken Livingstone that they did not want to change society but merely ensure that it ran more efficiently under New Labour than it did under the Conservatives. There are those who even now believe in their hearts that after a short period of time the new Labour Government will suddenly change its position, cast off the cloak and begin to operate policies that epitomise what we as a Trade Union Movement want to see. They suggest, for example, there is a third way. There is no third way, but there are only two ways. You can either collaborate, cooperate or be subservient, and that means operating within the confines of the system and with those words I think I am echoing the sentiments of the General Secretary of the Northumberland Miners who spoke so brilliantly just over two weeks ago; or alternatively you resist and you fight back, you do not allow any government, whatever its complexion, to dictate policies that you know in your heart and in your mind are wrong.

It is 13 years since the end of the miners' strike. Many in this hall today were involved in strikes in the 1970s and certainly involved in 1984-5. It is worth recalling that in 1985 a number of people in this hall were present when they heard the Labour Party leadership at its Annual Conference give a commitment, one, to keep the coal industry in public ownership; two, to reimburse the NUM with monies that were stolen from it by the Courts during periods of sequestration, receivership and mass arrests; and three, to reinstate all those miners who had been sacked, to repay them their wages for the time that they had lost and, above all, restore their pension rights. Their only crime was that they fought to save an industry, they fought to save a job, the most admirable concept ever seen in trade unionism possibly anywhere in the world.

After a year of New Labour what have we seen? We have seen that New Labour intend to leave the coal industry in the hands of privatised companies, and I make no apology for reminding this Conference that there was a fierce attack upon the national officials of the NUM when we criticised the Select Committee Report in 1993, particularly the four Labour members who said in a pamphlet they published,

*"We, the four Labour members on the Trade and Industry Select Committee, have decided to write this pamphlet for a number of reasons. We believe the report will provide the basis for a future integrated energy policy; secondly, it provides for a sustainable, publicly owned deep coal-mining industry; and thirdly because the report has been distorted and subject to misrepresentation. In particular we wish to rebut the claim in the June issue of The Miner and in the NUM Annual Conference Report that we did nothing to tackle the rigged market."*

Well I only hope that those Labour members who signed that pamphlet recall what happened to Ashfordby, to Wearmouth, to Point of Ayr, to Bilsthorpe, Monckton Hall, Coventry and Hem-Heath – pits that they promised to save. People who go to cinemas and weep when they watch the film *Brassed Off* should recall that a promise was made to Britain's miners to rectify the terrible wrong that had been wreaked upon Britain's miners and Britain's mining communities. I find it objectionable, I find it obscene, that one year on the Labour Government has not put right those wrongs of 1984 and 1993 and not kept the promises that they had the audacity to publish in a pamphlet one year later in 1994.

We now have a situation where not only do they oppose a return to public ownership but they are actively promoting PFI in order that they can see privatisation in another form. Who would have thought as I speak in this historic hall that we would be discussing a Labour Government – yes, a Labour Government – talking in terms of extending and expanding privatisation, but that is the reality of what we have to face today if we are honest with ourselves, and if there is one thing that I have always tried to do it is to be honest with our members and be straight with people who look upon this Union with a great deal of affection.

New Labour have done nothing to put right those wrongs that were done to our members. As recently as 1994 Tony Blair wrote to the Justice for Mineworkers Campaign and promised that the election of a New Labour Government would signal at least the restoration of pensions for those miners who were victimised in the 1984/85 miners' strike, and make no mistake about it, our people were criminalised – crimiñalised for doing one thing only, trying to defend an industry, their jobs, trying to defend a community and a way of life.

It is high time that we began to step up the campaign for a return to public ownership of this industry, begin the campaign throughout the length and breadth of Britain to restore to public ownership every single industry and service privatised by the Tories. We now have a system where industry after industry has been destroyed: shipbuilding, motor car manufacture, steel, coal and rail, all under attack. You cannot even switch your ticket from one line to another under this stupid privatisation policy. What is wrong with public ownership? What is wrong with the concept which is contained within our constitution, the Union Constitution that was supported by the people who built this very hall.

It is time that we remind ourselves what was said in 1992-3. We had more people on the streets than the hunting campaign – you know the blood sport lot who want to chase after foxes and kill them. We had more people supporting our movement in its demand to save jobs and pits than has ever been seen for any other industry

in Britain, and they – the Labour Party and the TUC – squandered it, they threw it away. We warned at that time that all 31 pits threatened with closure would be closed and even if there were some that were saved others would take their place on the closure list and that is what has happened. We warned that even pits like those in the Selby coalfield, a brand new coalfield, were not safe, and already a number of those pits are under threat, either through what is termed merger or through closure, collieries with 200 years' life. That is how much reserves of coal they have and they are under threat. Pits like Ashfordby with over 100 years of coal reserves, closed down. Don't tell me there was anything wrong with Ashfordby, I don't believe it. I was on the commission that established Ashfordby and I know that if the mining technology that should have been applied had been applied, we still would have had Ashfordby open today.

As we meet here today we have 16 deep coal mines operating. Some of them are termed combines, but the reality is that this industry has been slaughtered just as we have seen the slaughter throughout Europe of the French, the Belgian, the Italian, the Spanish, yes and now the German coal industries, many of those industries which were and are subsidised very heavily.

Today as I speak we have gas fired power stations supplying nearly 50% of electricity in Britain. I could understand it even though I may disagree with it, that if gas fired power stations were cheaper there would be an argument for them. I could at least understand it even though I may oppose it, if gas provided a long term solution for Britain's energy problems, but the reality is gas reserves, according to the Chairman of British Gas, will exhaust within 14 years. Now I am no economic expert but if that is the case it means within five year the price of gas will begin to escalate out of all recognition. The only place to go for gas will be the unstable economies of either Algeria or Russian, or of course alternatively try to make a deal with Norway at exorbitant prices. Whichever way you look at it, Britain's consumers of electricity and taxpayers would be paying a very hefty bill indeed as a result of the stupid, short-sighted policy of the last Government and, tragically, now this Government. 50% of all electricity generation means we are talking over 30 million tonnes per year!

Open cast mining is a blight, not only on the countryside of Britain but is also an environmental hazard. It produces inferior quality coal, ought to be banned and no sensible or civilised society with an abundance of deep coal mines, over a thousand years of reserves, would even contemplate mining coal by open cast methods, yet today we produce 16 million tonnes of coal from open cast mining. Don't tell me that the reason we are switching from coal to gas is because of environmental considerations. It does not make sense. If the environmental consideration is to switch from a carbon based fuel like coal how the hell does anyone justify continuing to produce 16 million tonnes of open cast coal, when we know that not only does it possess the same carbon content but at the same time it also afflicts the entire environment?

Coal imports are even worse. We are importing coal into Britain which is inferior to British deep mined coal, we are importing 20 million tonnes of it. It costs over a billion pounds a year on our balance of payments and I would have thought that any incoming government would have wanted to see how much we could save by utilising British energy rather than foreign coal imports. 36 million tonnes of coal used in Britain today is produced either by open cast mining or by the importation of coal, 36 million. Now my maths are not brilliant but if you have got 16 million tonnes of coal being replaced by gas and you have got 20 million tonnes of coal being replaced by imports it means we are replacing 36 million tonnes of deep mine

coal with coal imports or opencast coal production. It means that every single pit closed since certainly 1991-2 could have remained open and even now with a reversal of policy could be reopened, redeveloped.

Don't let them tell you pits cannot be reopened. I recall a pit only a mile and a half from these Headquarters, closed for twelve years on the basis that there were no coal reserves, and suddenly they found 75 years of coal. It must have been the geological wonder of the age or somebody might have missed a blip on a plan when they examined it, or then again it might have been some kind of political decision taken in 1984 and later in 1992/93.

Then of course we have nuclear power. Nuclear power produces 24 million tonnes of coal equivalent. The Dounreay station should have shown that on it sown it is uneconomic and dangerous. We're now the dumping ground now for nuclear waste throughout the world. There is no justification for nuclear power on either need, economic or environmental grounds. It is totally unsafe, it is totally uneconomic and it is totally unnecessary. If we stopped nuclear power now, and practically every other civilised nation on earth has done it, we immediately provide a market for British deep mine coal of 24 million tonnes per year.

So what are the solutions? The solutions are a reversal of policy, the reopening of mines that have already closed. I would love to see the regeneration of a mining industry in South Derbyshire, in Leicestershire, Lancashire and in the Midlands. where there are masses of coal. I would like to see the tremendous development potential realised in South Wales, and only yesterday I had a report presented to me by the General Secretary showing just how much coal reserves are available in South Wales, probably as much as the rest of Britain. All squandered on the short-termism of the market. In Scotland we have two of the biggest single coalfields – untapped, virgin areas – anywhere in Europe, and yet there seems to be an obsession with attacking the mining industry, or maybe it is – as I believe – an attack on the National Union of Mineworkers.

We have seen our jobs attacked, we have seen our communities attacked and we have seen our pensions attacked and we now see that New Labour is talking about using the surpluses produced in the mineworkers' pension scheme to regenerate coalmining areas with alternative industries; I am told there has been a suggestion that the surpluses generated from the mineworkers' pension scheme in the form of an actuarial surplus by the New Labour Government should be used to help pay pensions of those who were unable to get one as a result of being sacked in the industry. The last person to fiddle pension funds was Robert Maxwell. I will tell you this, if this Government continues to take the surplus out of our pension scheme they are as guilty as Robert Maxwell was of robbing our people of pensions, deferred pay that properly belongs to our members. *(Applause)*

Comrades, I have never understood how any socialist can possibly come to the conclusion that pension fund monies should not be used for one purpose and for one purpose only, the provision of pensions. It seems to me logic and it seems to me to be a principled position to adopt and it is high time that all of us, whatever our political views, pressurised all New Labour MPs into understanding that the surpluses already taken have to be repaid. I doubt whether there is any other system in the world which would tolerate this kind of theft. The only reason I now know I can talk about it as theft is because we had a libel case in the High Court and I was told, *"You can't libel a government."* Well you certainly can't libel this one, and there can be no argument that not even the Tories declared they would use our pension surpluses in the way that New Labour is now talking about using them.

But the industry itself has got to look forward. We have a situation to face not only in terms of sustaining the industry and the collieries, but also in looking at the wages and conditions of our members. There are already attempts being made to impose or introduce terms and conditions which are adverse as far as our membership are concerned. It is years since this Union was able to sit down with an employer and negotiate properly wages and conditions on behalf of the membership. Those who broke away and formed the Union of Democratic Mineworkers said, in the words of their President, *"We feel gutted, we feel betrayed"* – what the hell did they expect? When the capitalist system have used them they throw them away like a cast-off piece of clothing. The fact is that none of them, none of them, have collective bargaining rights or conciliation agreements. Here we are in 1998 looking towards the future as far as conciliation and collective bargaining is concerned, but we will not achieve it without a struggle.

I want to give a warning, this Union will not tolerate much longer a refusal by the employers to sit down and negotiate wages and conditions. I will be asking our members to give us a mandate if necessary to take whatever action is necessary to win those negotiating rights. What sort of wages do I believe as President our members are entitled to? Well I will tell you. I have been having a look at the wages of Richard Budge; I have been having a look at the wage increases of the top executives of the RJB Mining Company. On the basis of the productivity in our industry, on the basis of what has taken place over the past few years, I believe that mineworkers on the coal face should have a salary of £50,000 a year. I believe that mineworkers elsewhere underground should have a salary on an annual basis of £40,000 a year, and that workers on the surface should have a £30,000 a year salary. Before anyone calls those figures ridiculous let me remind you that when I called for the £100 a week miner in the 1970s most newspapers in Britain thought I had gone off my rocker. Well what's wrong with the £1,000 a week miner? Who is worth more, someone sitting on the green benches in the House of Commons or someone working down in the bowels of the earth? I know if I'm given the option which job I'd have and as far as I am concerned our members are worth every single penny of that claim. If they want to introduce new terms and conditions then they ought to be sitting down with us now on that basis. It also means more, it means that the mineworkers' pension scheme should be reopened to every single miner in Britain wherever he works, so that he or she can contribute into that pension scheme. It was wrong it should be taken away and it is right it should be put back.

Hours of work. I have already referred to the historic building in which we meet but in 1925 – in this building – we were promised a six hour day. European workers are winning a 35 hour week, and we ought to have a four day, 35 hour week. There's nothing wrong with that, it's a perfectly sensible and reasonable proposition to put forward, one that can be sustained anywhere and one, incidentally, which is already being introduced into the engineering industry. Now, if it is right that they can have it in engineering I am sure it must be right for the coal mining industry.

I believe, Chair, it would be wrong for me not to deal at least briefly with the general political situation. Full employment has always been the aim of this Union and, indeed, until relatively recently was the aim of the New Labour Party. I read the figures yesterday in the Labour Research Facts Service and it is now conceded that the number of people without a job is 4.2 million. If you agree with the Rowntree Foundation Trust's analysis of the number of people of employable age without a job, then the true figure is over 7 million.

You don't need to be a statistician or an expert to look around and see the effect, the devastation, caused by unemployment. Go to villages in the North East; go to

a village like Grimethorpe in Barnsley and see the effect of the pit closure programme. Go to places like Consett, go to places like Motherwell where steel industries are being closed down, and you see at a glance exactly what is caused as a result of mass unemployment. All I can say is what I said in Motherwell when I spoke there recently: if only the workers at Ravenscraig had listened to what we said in 1984 and decided to take strike action alongside us rather than break our picket lines then their steel plants would have been open today, as well as our pits, and there is a lesson there for all of us.

Of course, we are still lumbered by anti-trade union laws, the most vicious anti-trade union laws, certainly in the western world. I am told that the new Government legislation will provide automatic recognition for trade unions with over 50%. Well, we have over 50% and I can tell you that Frank Cave and I have been invited for the first time by one mining company to meet them. I don't know whether it's the colour of my suit or the colour of my tie that has suddenly changed the opinions of those who are in charge of these industries. All I can say is that as far as I am concerned we will meet with the coal owners but on the clear understanding that our position is absolutely unshakeable, that we want to see this industry returned to public ownership; and secondly that we want to see terms and conditions commensurate with the task performed. I want to see from the Government the introduction of undertakings given and the undertakings promised in 1985 and 1993.

I believe that that is a very minimum and the minimum is a word that is on everybody's lips at the moment, the minimum wage. It has taken more than a year to figure out what a minimum wage should be, £3.60 an hour – £3.60 – provided, of course, that you are not young and then you don't get it. The Chairman of the Commission which decided that workers should have a minimum wage of £3.60 an hour is himself paid £62 an hour. That's the stupid hypocrisy that we are having to endure at the present time. It is high time, comrades, that all of us understood what is taking place here in Britain today. We cannot tolerate any longer the attack on our basic services because it is just as much part of your terms and conditions of pay in health, education, housing and social services as it is in the money that you earn from your employer.

This year celebrates the 50th anniversary of the National Health Service and you know and I know that it has been run down systematically by a government over 18 years that wanted to see its destruction, that wanted to see the development of private health care. We now have 1,200,000 waiting for an operation, a position which is an absolute scandal in our society. Quite honestly you could wipe out, literally overnight, all the waiting lists, and if you do not believe that we can extinguish the waiting lists I will tell you how to do it. Go to a hospital and see how long you have to wait for an operation on the NHS. They will probably tell you something like nine or twelve months. You offer the same consultant an amount of money to have it done privately and you will be in hospital the next day having it done on private health care. As far as I am concerned if they can operate on someone who is prepared and able to pay, then they ought to be made to operate on a person free of charge at the time of need and on demand. That surely is a basic concept of the NHS. *(Applause)* For that we need an additional £9 billion per year investing into our NHS. Don't tell me we can't get it. They've just agreed to spend £7 billion on new warships. Which comes first, new warships to wreak havoc and destruction or a National Health Service to improve the quality of human life?

Our education system is in tatters and what stupid hypocrisy from people like David Blunkett who was one of the beneficiaries of a free education system, to turn round and tell parents they now have to pay part of the education fees, to tell youngsters

that they have to take our a loan in order to education themselves. These Labour Ministers had the benefit of a free education system established by the Labour Government in 1945-1951, and we have the right to demand the same consideration in 1988. My view is that this Union has to be seen as a real campaigning union, alongside others, in defence of those things won in a century of struggle.

Taxation. Our policy as a Union on taxation is clear, nobody should pay a penny tax on less than £10,000 income per year. Those who receive above this amount should pay tax and the fats cats like the Richard Budes of this world should pay 80 pence in the pound tax. They can afford it. I will tell you this, I wish everybody in this hall was on the same sort of salary and paying 80 pence in the pound. You would be a hell of a lot better off than you are at the present time. If you do not believe me you have only got to look back some 20 years to see there were people earning very substantial salaries and paying substantial tax.

Military spending. We are spending billions on nuclear weapons and at the same time we are trying to preach morality. What on earth are we talking about? How on earth can the Prime Minister of this country stand up and condemn India and Pakistan for carrying out nuclear tests when here in Britain we continue to spend £31 billion developing Trident nuclear missiles? Both are wrong and both ought to be condemned. It is high time we got our priorities right.

It is also high time that we began to step up our campaign to get Britain out of the European Common Market, the European Union. If the European Union means anything it should protect our coal and steel industries. These should be purchased within the Market, and yet the European Union is importing nearly 150 million tonnes of coal per year from all over the world, while our pits close, our steelworks close and our jobs are lost. It costs Britain billions to remain in the EEC and it is time that we got out of it and back into the world.

It would be remiss of me, Chair, at this Annual Conference not to remind people that there is an alternative to the European Common Market; it is called the rest of the world. If anyone wants to ask me where we would trade if we came out of the EEC I will tell you where we could begin to trade, we could begin to trade with people like Cuba whose representative is in this hall today and who have been blockaded for 30 years by the United States of America. That's where we could begin to trade with the third world, with Africa, with Asia, with the Middle East, with people in other parts of the world that could supply us with goods and services and we in turn with technology and expertise.

I conclude, Chair, by saying there will be those, I have no doubt, maybe even Richard Budge, who think that our demands are unreasonable. As James Connolly said, all those years ago, *"Some men faint-hearted ever seek our programme to retouch and will insist whene'er they speak that we demand too much. Tis passing strange as I declare, such statements cause me mirth, for our demands most moderate are, we only want the earth."* I hope this Union subscribes to this concept and its own constitution. (Applause)