

Saturday, 1st July, 2000.

(MORNING SESSION)

IN THE CHAIR - MR. ARTHUR SCARGILL,
(PRESIDENT, NATIONAL UNION OF MINEWORKERS)

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

This Biennial Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers is the first NUM Conference in the 21st Century, and we meet at a time when yet again the mining industry is under attack from all sides, both nationally and internationally.

In 1982, I warned that unless Government policy was changed the mining industry would be virtually destroyed by the end of the 20th Century. At that time there were 219 pits and 232,000 miners. At the start of the 21st Century – 20 years on – there are just 33 producing collieries – including combines – and manpower is now a mere 10,500!

Between 1979 and 1997 we saw a Tory Government do everything in its power to destroy the National Union of Mineworkers. The Tories never forgot the defeats the NUM inflicted upon them in 1972 and 1974 and were determined to do everything they could to destroy a force which they saw as the main opposition to their plan to introduce a “free market”, privatisation and anti-trade union legislation.

The 1979-1997 Tory Government ruthlessly pursued its policy of a “free market”, allowing 20 million tonnes of imported coal per annum, despite the fact that they knew foreign coal was in all cases subsidised both directly and indirectly.

At the end of 1994, the Tories privatised the mining industry. In doing so they reversed the 1946 Labour Government Nationalisation Act and fulfilled the Thatcher Government's ideological promise to privatise “even the coal industry”.

Following the Miners' Strike in 1984/85, the Tory Government and National Coal Board unilaterally terminated a Joint Conciliation Scheme which had operated effectively and efficiently for over 40 years.

Between 1979 and 1997, the Tories introduced a series of anti-trade union laws, all designed to render trade unionism ineffective. British workers, unlike workers throughout Europe, have no legal rights to strike, secondary action is prohibited and industrial action for political purposes such as defence of the National Health Service is likewise prohibited.

These Tory laws, which are in conflict with international law and the United Nations Charter, have largely been accepted by New Labour, and in some cases made even more draconian.

At this, our first conference of the 21st Century, we should not in any way be surprised or disillusioned by these developments – because all these measures are a case of history repeating itself.

For example, in 1896 the then coal owners unilaterally terminated the industry's Conciliation Scheme – just as 90 years later in 1986 the Government and National Coal Board unilaterally terminated our Conciliation Scheme and gave favoured status to the breakaway UDM.

In 1900, British miners were struggling to win basic rights, and on 25 June 1900, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, the MFGB, adopted a resolution calling for the complete nationalisation of mines. It would be appropriate if this week we were to adopt a similar resolution calling for the British mining industry to be taken back into public ownership.

Our industry has been the target of incessant attacks for over 50 years. Successive Tory and Labour Governments have implemented pit closure programmes which in retrospect represent economic madness. In the 1960s policies pursued by both the Tory and Labour Governments turned miners into “industrial gypsies”, as they were forced to move from one coalfield to another with a promise that they and their sons had “jobs for life”.

In the 1960s Britain's taxpayers were told that uneconomic pits should be closed and our country should use “cheap” Middle East oil. Oil was in fact never cheaper

than coal, yet it took a full 14 years and a quadrupling of oil prices to demonstrate the short-sighted stupidity of Government policy throughout the 1960s.

We were told at the beginning of the 1960s that nuclear energy was to be a replacement for indigenous deep-mine coal. For over 40 years, Governments deliberately lied to both miners and the British people – not only about the true cost of nuclear energy, but about its attendant dangers to its own workforce, to people generally and to the environment.

We now know, for example, that for years the nuclear power industry received an annual subsidy of over £1.3 billion, whilst the coal industry was denied any support. Despite this massive subsidy, nuclear power-generated electricity was and is 450% more expensive than electricity generated by coal.

These two misguided Government policy decisions in the 1960s, supported by both Tory and Labour, led to the closure of 618 pits and the loss of 472,000 jobs in the 20 years to 1980. Yet still, Governments refused to learn the lessons of mistaken policies and again set out on a strategy of pit closures and job losses, only using gas and imported coal as alternative fuels to economic British deep mine coal.

In the 1990s, the British people were told that gas-fired power stations were far cheaper than those which used coal. This – like the argument in favour of oil – was a deliberate lie. For example, a new gas-fired power station employing under 60 people generates electricity which is 30% more expensive than a conventional coal-fired power station which employs between 400-500 people.

In addition, we know – as a result of evidence given by British Gas to the House of Commons Trade and Industry Select Committee – that Britain's gas reserves will exhaust within 15 years, and yet we also know that Britain's deep-mine coal industry produces cheaper electricity and has reserves which will last for over a thousand years!

First the Tories and now New Labour continue with this insane “free market” policy, allowing privately owned industries to produce electricity from expensive and dangerous nuclear power, expensive gas-fired power stations, expensive imported coal, and continue opencast mining, thus polluting the environment.

The Tory Government's butchery of the mining industry was economically, socially and politically disadvantageous for Britain. New Labour's continuation of that same policy represents a savagery which ought to be condemned not only by miners, but by the population as a whole.

The Tories privatised amongst other things gas, electricity, water, rail telecommunications, steel and coal, and yet New Labour – despite a promise to reverse these insane policies – have not only continued to support privatisation, but are in fact extending the evil policy of privatisation.

In its attack on Britain's miners, the National Coal Board sacked over 1,000 mineworkers in 1984/85 and with Government support “stole” £1.5 billion from the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme.

New Labour today stands condemned – not only because it refuses to take the mining industry back into public ownership or introduce a sensible integrated energy policy, but, above all, because of its insensitive, callous attitude towards miners who were sacked in 1984/85 – miners whose only crime was trying to defend a publicly owned industry and preserve jobs not just for themselves but for their sons and daughters.

The Tories, as part of their privatisation programme, deliberately amended the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme Trust Deed – first to allow the breakaway UDM to be represented, and then allow the Government to take 50% of any actuarial surplus generated by the pension fund monies. These are miners' deferred wages!

The New Labour Government is now using our Pension Fund monies to “regenerate” mining communities decimated as a result of pit closures. Their policies are, astonishingly, welcomed by the Coalfield Communities Campaign – an organisation willing to use Mineworkers' Pension Fund monies to attempt to re-develop coalfield areas destroyed by the Tory Government.

The Coalfield Communities Campaign is constantly seeking to utilise monies – including MPS monies – to “regenerate” areas vandalised by the Tories. Their idea of “regeneration” is to create new service industries, often with low pay and short-term employment, as alternatives on sites where collieries formerly stood.

I want to make it absolutely clear that we want to truly regenerate coalfield areas, by re-opening the pits which have closed and developing new pits in all parts of the British coalfield.

We are opposed to the use of Pension Fund monies for the purpose of re-developing the mining industry. Mineworkers' Pension Fund monies should be used for one purpose and one purpose only – to provide pensions for retired miners, widows and other beneficiaries.

I can see no difference between a crook like Robert Maxwell who stole £450 million from Mirror Group Pension Funds and a Labour Government which not only refuses to hand back money stolen by British Coal and the Tories, but continues to “take” £250 million per year, at the same time as it denies justice for sacked miners, and after three years in office still refuses to grant pensions to them and allow a pension entitlement to all miners at the age of 50.

This first conference of the NUM in the 21st Century needs to make clear to the New Labour Government – just as our forebears did to the Government in 1900 – that we want justice for all mineworkers – we want to “reclaim our rights”!

The introduction of a “free market” system in the energy field has resulted in job losses, higher energy prices and has seen mining communities slaughtered, producing a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.

The only way to reverse this unplanned economic mess is to ban all nuclear energy, close gas-fired power stations, ban opencast mining, end imports of foreign coal and introduce a sensible integrated energy policy based on clean coal technology, together with renewable forms of energy such as wind, wave, tide, geothermal and solar power.

Countries throughout Europe have been and are closing down their nuclear industries. Similar action by our Government would produce a market for Britain's deep-mine coal of 27 million tonnes per year.

A reversal in the policy of using our limited gas supplies to produce electricity would provide in itself an annual market of 40 million tonnes for our deep-mine coal industry.

Opencast mining produces 16 million tonnes per annum, whilst coal imports are running at 20 million tonnes per year. If opencast mining and coal imports were stopped, it would not only save British taxpayers over £1 billion per year and help the environment, it would provide a market for 36 million tonnes of British deep-mine coal and create thousands of jobs.

An integrated energy policy of the type envisaged in this Address would increase the market for Britain's deep-mine coal by over 100 million tonnes per year. This is not an unrealistic proposal, bearing in mind that only a few years ago Britain produced 220 million tonnes of coal and supplied 90 % of Britain's energy needs.

The Government should fulfil the pledges it made to British miners and to the British people when it was the Party in opposition.

Is it too much to ask that a Party which makes a promise to working people prior to its election should at least have the honesty and integrity to fulfil their promise after it has been elected?

WAGES AND CONDITIONS

Despite British Coal's unilateral termination of the industry's Conciliation Scheme in 1986, and RJB Mining's refusal to agree a Conciliation Scheme or accept collective bargaining, the NUM decided in early 1999 to consult its members in an individual ballot. We did so with a recommendation to take strike action in the event that RJB continued to refuse to negotiate a national wages agreement with the NUM acceptable to all our members, irrespective of the numbers involved or where they worked.

We also wanted a Conciliation Scheme which incorporated full collective bargaining in every RJB-owned pit/unit in the British coalfield.

RJB had initially informed the NUM that it was imposing a wage agreement on 1st January 1999, and then informed the NUM that the Company had negotiated a Wage Agreement with the breakaway UDM. Following a ballot result supporting industrial action, the NUM made clear it was not prepared to agree the derisory terms imposed by RJB or the terms accepted by the UDM, and that strike action would go ahead as and from midnight, 14th March 1999.

At the "eleventh hour", RJB contacted the NUM and agreed to negotiate on Saturday, 13th March 1999.

Following negotiations which went into Saturday evening, RJB finally agreed to consolidate an additional 10% Incentive Bonus payment into basic pay, thereby consolidating at the "core collieries" a total of 50% Incentive Bonus into basic pay.

The Company further agreed to a 10% consolidation increase for miners at Lease and Licence pits and also agreed to recognise the NUM, introduce a Conciliation Scheme and accept Collective Bargaining in respect of all NUM members – a Conciliation Agreement which would apply to all our members, irrespective of the number employed, at every colliery or unit owned by the Company in Nottinghamshire, Midlands, the North East, Yorkshire and nationally; this Conciliation Agreement to cover all grades including mineworkers, WPIS, clerical and administrative grades.

The 44% increase in basic pay was the largest basic wage increase in 50 years, but the most important victory was the fact that RJB was forced to negotiate a national pay settlement with the NUM – a pay settlement which applied to all our members at every colliery/unit owned by the Company in Nottingham, the Midlands, the North East and Yorkshire.

However, despite this settlement and RJB's agreement to recognise the NUM, the Company is still procrastinating on reaching a Conciliation Scheme with the National Union, and instead is seeking to backtrack on its written undertaking.

For 40 years, between 1946 and 1986, the NUM negotiated and signed National Wage agreements on behalf of all our members on a National basis – and between 1986 and 1994 we were able to force British Coal to agree the same basic pay increase for all our members at every pit throughout the British coalfield.

We were able to do this following a successful Industrial Tribunal decision which ordered that British Coal must not discriminate against NUM members and must pay the same basic wage to all mineworkers, irrespective of which pit/unit or coalfield are they were employed in.

RJB is acting in breach of the signed Agreement of March 1999, and in view of this we have to take all necessary steps – including legal action and/or industrial action – to force the Company to honour its written Agreement to recognise the NUM, implement a Joint National Conciliation Scheme and accept collective bargaining. If RJB could sign an Agreement in March, 1999, then they can honour it in July, 2000.

As we enter the 21st Century, our Union should be in a position to demand a six-hour day and a four-day working week. As long ago as 1919, a Royal Commission recommended the introduction of a six-hour day – surely 81 years later with all the technological advances, we have earned the right to a six-hour day and a four-day week!

The NUM must also press for Early Retirement on full pay at the age of 55, at the same time demanding full pensions at the age of 50. These demands only bring us into line with many other mining industries throughout the world.

It is particularly galling that we still do not have the right to have full pensions paid at 50, despite the fact that thousands of our members were allowed to receive pensions at this age whilst thousands of others are denied.

POLITICAL SITUATION

According to a report published by the TUC on 3rd March 2000, there are now over 4 million, or 16% of the working population, unemployed – a figure more than four times the “official” 1.1 million claimed by the New Labour Government.

According to the MORI GB data, even the TUC Report understates the number of unemployed by 5 million, and in Britain there are now over 9 million, or 36%, of people of employable age without a job!

At the start of the 21st Century, nine and a half million or 16.3% of all people in Britain live on or below the poverty line. This affects citizens of all ages, but none are affected more severely than old people.

Hundreds of thousands of pensioners today are trying to survive on incomes that do not meet the minimum needs of survival. If pensioners had the same level of income they had when their pensions were “linked” to the average increase in wages and the Retail Price Index, it would cost just £4 billion.

Our pensioners have had a really raw deal. The agreement reached in 1978 between the then Labour Government and workers was designed to link pension increases to the average rise in wages or the increase in inflation, whichever was the higher.

If that “link” had not been abolished by the Thatcher Government, the current single person’s pension of £67.70 would today be £97.45, or 43.9% higher, whilst a married couple who currently receive £107.90 would be receiving £155.80, or 44.3% more.

That is how much pensioners have lost during eighteen years of Tory misrule and three years of New Labour's failure to put right a gross injustice!

Another terrible injustice is homelessness, which has reached epidemic proportions, with people sleeping on the pavements of our cities, in doorways and in cardboard boxes. Thirty years ago how many of us thought that life in Britain – difficult as it has always been for working class people – would come to this?

Yet, homelessness in Britain could be eradicated if we were to build or refurbish one million homes every year for the next five years. Supplying the desperately needed five million new or refurbished homes would cost £3 billion per year – but it would give jobs to three-quarters of a million unemployed building workers and save money currently expended on unemployment.

The Tory Government and now New Labour have systematically dismantled a National Health Service which just over 20 years ago was regarded as the best in the world.

Today Britain spends 6.8% of its total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care, whilst the United States – notorious for its lack of care – spends 13.9%! We need to spend an additional £13 billion per year immediately, and even that increase would still leave us spending less than the USA.

Indeed, health care spending internationally says a great deal about Britain today. This is not the “caring society” of Nye Bevan, but the evil market-driven capitalist system supported by Tony Blair.

Under the Tories and New Labour, education standards are being eroded so that we already have what is virtually a two-tier system. In regions and communities suffering from unemployment and poverty, State schools are being closed or privatised.

CONCLUSION

During the past 50 years we have seen amazing technological change, but unfortunately this new technology has been used to create unemployment rather than reduce the working week whilst eradicating unemployment and poverty.

Today Britain has only 17% of its economy based in manufacturing, and this should be a source of great concern to everybody who wants to see a strong thriving economy. We have witnessed the destruction of industries such as coal, steel, engineering, shipbuilding and dock work, motor car manufacturing, fishing and farming. The policies being pursued by the Government are a recipe for economic and political disaster.

Meanwhile, the Trade Union Movement has become too compliant, too “businesslike” – almost indistinguishable from the bosses' organisation, the CBI. We do not want “partnership deals” with capitalism. We want to see capitalism, both national and global, destroyed completely.

I want to see a Trade Union Movement which is prepared to stand up and fight back, willing to defy anti-trade union laws, prepared to support other workers involved in struggle and people least able to help themselves.

I want to see our Trade Union Movement advocating the establishment of a Socialist system where the means of production, distribution and exchange are owned in common by all the people for the benefit of all the people.

This is not a pipe dream – it is the only alternative to global capitalism. As we enter the 21st Century, let us learn from the struggles of our forebears one hundred years ago. They were prepared in 1900 to create a new political force, willing to fight for the overthrow of capitalism.

We now live in a world where global capitalism dominates our lives and where decisions taken in one country have a profound impact on the standard of life in another. We only have to look at the decision of BMW at the Rover plant, or at Ford's decision at Dagenham. The Government should have sent both firms packing back to Frankfurt and Detroit and taken Rover and Ford into public ownership.

We are better placed than our forebears to advocate a revolutionary change. We should not be afraid to chart a course towards strong militant trade unionism whose goal is not only the defence of workers' rights, but the replacement of a rotten capitalist system with a Socialist system whose dawn would herald a new beginning for the human race.