

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

This is the 63rd Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers but sadly we meet today for the first time with not one deep mine producing coal in the United Kingdom.

The first conference had been in the Albert Hall, Blackpool and was chaired by Will Lawther who had been elected President of the Union with 402,000 taking part in the ballot. He had presided over the last conference of the Miners Federation of Great Britain, our predecessor 2 years before.

We had a coal mining industry that employed over 700,000 people. There are 131 delegates from Areas, 25 NEC members and 3 Officials attended that first conference.

Here we are today 62 years later at the 2016 conference still meeting as the National Union of Mineworkers having travelled a long and at times despairing road to where we are but never forgetting from whence we came.

This Union can be proud of the role we have taken and continue to take in fighting for our members, former members, families and communities with regard to health and safety, terms and conditions, equality and social justice.

Since our formation we have achieved so much.

Playing a huge role in electing the Labour government in 1945 which gave us our welfare state and National Health Service we are so proud of.

The prime mover in achieving nationalisation in 1947.

Making our coal mines a safer and better place to work through the 1954 Coal Mines Act. Remember the introduction of the self-rescuer which allowed miners time to escape in the event of fire or explosion underground which the Union fought for years to achieve.

Supporting the modernisation and mechanisation of our industry which replaced the back breaking and potentially unsafe working practices our predecessors had to endure with all the health problems they brought.

Achieving rightful compensation and industrial injury pension rights for miners who were blighted with disease and injury due to their mining employment. And we should never forget the areas of the Union who committed themselves to fund the compensation claims and produce evidence to the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to achieve this.

The 1974 Pneumoconiosis Scheme and although now a dated scheme in regards to compensation awards it did give Miners an automatic right to compensation without having to go through the Courts if prove of suffering from the disease was proven.

The Court cases that were fought to establish Vibration White Finger compensation scheme and the argumentation and evidence given to I.I.A.C. which led to it also being recognised as an industrial disease suffered by Miners. This led to thousands of our members receiving payments in recognition of their disability.

The Court cases that were fought to establish the Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease compensation scheme also recognised as an industrial disease which again led to even more Miners receiving payments in recognition of their disability, although it also sadly proved in many cases that that quality of life that many of the Miners who had severe disability from the disease suffered could never be adequately compensated for that loss.

Although the Court case for compensation relating to Miners suffering from Osteoarthritis of the Knees was lost because a Judge perversely time barred the claim, the medical facts researched and submitted to the court as supporting evidence were enough when shown to the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to

overturn their previous decision not to accept it as an Industrial Disease. This again has benefited many Miners who suffered from the disease with either increased or new Industrial Injuries pension payments.

Add to that the number of injury claims this Union has supported for compensation and industrial injuries benefit for miners who were injured at work and you realise the many thousands of miners and families this Union has enabled to win their right to millions of pounds in compensation and benefits over many years of NUM representation.

We must also remember that following the 1974 Miners Strike the Union also negotiated a new Mineworkers Pension Scheme which brought about a massive improvement in what Miners could receive as a pension payment on retirement compared to what the payments were before based on the new contributions from the Employers.

The Union also negotiated the Workwear scheme which took the burden of washing our outer clothes away from our homes and placed it on the Employer.

These are some of our achievements as a Union that stand out over the years but equally important was the role of our Branch Officials and Committees in the day to day representation of our members at pit levels in ensuring that safety, organisation, fairness, disciplinary matters and proper wage payments were dealt with. The Branch Officials were integral to ensuring the Miners rights were adhered to by Management and the Unions credibility was maintained as they were the ones at the Pick face who were often the first port of call when problems arose. I have over the years met ex Miners who have moved to other jobs through Pit closures, some of whom were at times critical of the Union but soon realised in their new careers that the representation they got from our Reps was not forthcoming in their new place of work and they in hindsight realised how well they were looked after by our Branch Officials when working in the Coalmines.

As we reflect on our achievements we should never forget our setbacks and how our coal industry and Union has been treated by successive governments.

We did have support on a few occasions –

Nationalisation in 1947 was hailed as a new beginning and it should have been but instead of allowing the miners themselves to have a greater decision making role in the industry it allowed the Tory government of the day in the 1980's and their lackeys in the Coal Board to begin the destruction of our industry.

We did have the “plan for coal” brought forward in 1978 by the Labour government only to be binned by the Tory government when they were elected in 1979.

We did receive some aid from the Labour government in the late 1990's but apart from those our industry has been systematically destroyed especially by Tory led governments.

From the moment Thatcher was elected in 1979 our Union was targeted because of our previous successful disputes in 1972 and 1974 and as we were seen as the vanguard in standing up for workers' rights and against injustice in our country and the demise of our industry was the vehicle they chose to take on and diminish the power of not just the NUM but the whole Trade Union Movement.

In 1984 our Union rightly entered into a dispute to fight to prevent the decimation of our coal industry and communities which lasted for a year. We had already had the unofficial walkout in 1981 when a hit list of Colliery closures was announced and then withdrawn as the Government plans to take us on were not ready at that stage. Some of the Areas had already had a number of Closures in the years preceding the 84

dispute, so despite the lies and the propaganda spouted by the Government and NCB the vast majority of Miners knew we were entering a fight for our existence as a major industry.

Although it was supposed to be a dispute with an employer, the clear evidence from cabinet minutes (the ones we have been allowed to see) show that the National Coal Board was being instructed by the then Tory government.

The Tory government made the strike political not the NUM.

The lies that parliament and the country were told about pit closures showed the contempt the Tories had for democratic process.

That is why the Orgreave inquiry was not given the go ahead because it would further prove the government's hand of the tiller in allowing the police and judiciary to misuse their powers.

The end of the 84/85 strike led to a period of systematic pit closures, it also seen the NCB tear up longstanding agreements and led to smaller workforce and long hour culture being introduced through the use of more overtime working.

Then in 1994 our Industry was privatised, many thought that the coal industry would not last more than 5 to 10 years following privatisation but despite all the hurdles put in our way and the effort of the Union and the remaining miners we fought and lasted much longer.

The last few years have once again shown the determination of the previous coalition government and the present Tory to finally end coal mining in this country.

This Union argued long and hard for State Aid to be made available to the remaining collieries to develop new coal faces in order to sustain their future and ensure that the United Kingdom maintained an indigenous Coal Industry and did not rely solely on imported coal although the majority of the Countries Coal did already come from other countries.

The initial requirement of approximately £20 million for the cost of new Developments became over £350 million because the government departments argued they could not give State Aid under European rules and it took 18 months for them to accept they were wrong.

Their view only changed because we met with the European Commission who confirmed what we had argued for months that State Aid could be given. We also had to drag UK Coal Company into supporting our view on State Aid, all this mean the amount of money required for redevelopment of the collieries increased nearly twenty fold.

There are two ways of looking at how the government departments we were dealing with handled our case for State Aid.

Either they were completely incompetent because they did not know or understand the rules on State Aid.

Or they deliberately prolonged the decision until the amount required was so large it allowed the Tory government to use the argument it was not value to the public purse to give the State Aid required.

The National Officials view is quite clear that it was deliberately held up in order to kill off any chance of saving the remaining deep mines.

Once again we see the Tories hand on the tiller as it was in 1979, 1984/85, 1994 and in 2015 when they finally achieved their goal of no deep mining in the UK.

The road map that has taken us from 1945 until now has shown how badly the miners, their families and communities have been treated by these governments despite the fact much of the wealth of this country were built on the backs of those self-same miners, families and communities.

But one thing they have not achieved despite all their efforts is that this great Union is still here and will be as long as required.

I have spent a long time on how the Union has got to where we are but it is equally important I address the present and our future.

We have a country and a world divided in many ways different from what we have seen in the past.

Here in Britain we have seen the return of a Tory government, the country deciding to leave the European Union, the Scottish Independent vote from 2014, all of which have unfortunately led to our nation being divided and blaming the wrong people for the anger and frustration people feel due to austerity and seeing the greedy rich getting richer.

If ever we need a unified and electable Labour Party to form the next government it is now.

When I looked back at the 1945 first NUM conference report ironically there was a motion from Scotland calling on the Labour movement to unite and fight for the election of a Labour government and when that happened the country elected the most radical left-wing government we've ever had and whose legacies remain with us today despite the Tories shameful attempts to destroy them. I am talking about the creation of the NHS, of our Welfare State, of the Public ownership of Major Industries and Utilities these things proved what can be achieved through a Labour Government.

The Labour Party has come through two divisive leadership elections and we must all now unite behind the Leader and strive to return a Labour government whenever the election comes with a manifesto that the British people can support in order to once again change our country for the betterment of the many and not as at present for the benefit of the few rich and privileged.

It is even bleaker when we consider the international picture, the rise of ISIS and religious fundamentalism, the ravages of war in the Middle East which is causing so much destruction and loss of life. This has resulted in the refugee crisis which is causing desperate families to flee and fall into the hands of traffic smugglers who exploit them financially with promises of safety and new opportunities.

The knock on effect of the growing refugee problem has seen the rise of the far right in many European countries including our own as they stir up peoples fear and seek to blame refugees and immigrants for their country's problems.

We have seen the growing aggression of the Putin led Russia with the intrusion into Georgia and the Ukraine, the ongoing threat to the Baltic nations, some of whom are in NATO and his unfettered support for the dictator Assad in Syria who has carried our war crimes on his own people. Anyone who has witnessed the scenes of destruction, death and injury in Aleppo shown on our news channels cannot help but be moved by the suffering.

The recent election of Trump in America emphasises just how divisive the world has become. We looked on aghast at this rhetoric and pledges during the election campaign thinking the American people never would vote for him but they did and I think his election certainly adds to the world becoming much more unstable and dangerous.

The globalisation that has allowed multi-nationals to move production from one country to another for higher profits and lower wages.

The fact they can avoid paying legitimate tax in countries and the loss of jobs, decimation of communities and poverty that brings, has created an anger and a crying out for change but unfortunately that change is allowing Trump and the right wingers to succeed. At this stage we need to ensure that we turn that cry for change into support for radical left policies that will benefit the many not the few.

Finally can I turn to the future of the Union, because of the closure of the coal-mining industry our NEC decided that it is crucial that we must continue to do what we have always done, that is to represent our members, their families and communities.

We have taken legal advice and subsequently changed our Rule Book to allow us to continue operating at present although this is an evolving process which we will have to address on a continuing basis.

The fact is where in the past we were a workplace based organisation who for the main were looking after our working members and to a lesser extent our former members and families, that role has now reversed.

This is not a new thing as some Areas lost their deep mines a number of years ago but have continued to function as a Union.

I am of the opinion that National Union of Mineworkers and its representatives must continue to carry out their duties as before, because if we are not there to do this no one else will with as much dedication and hard work as the Union's representatives can. Who can replace the expertise and knowledge our Medical Appeal Reps have over many years, who will be there to assist with Pension problems or Concessionary Coal that can arise. We have always been to a certain extent a unique Industry that in many cases in the past our Communities were next to our workplace and people turned to the Union for help and advice outside the Pit gates and that will continue.

Our industry may be gone but the legacy problems associated with it continue and we have to be there to assist where required as we have always done. Many of us hold positions on other organisations which relate to coal-mining communities, Convalescent Homes, Area Welfare Committees Regeneration Trusts to name a few and it is through the Union we hold these positions and we must continue to play an active role to assist and protect our communities.

What saddens me that we continue to be challenged by certain individuals about remaining as a Union, and my view is that these individuals especially the ones who held positions in the Union seem to be ignorant of the fact that there is and always has been a world outside the pit gates where ex-miners, families and communities exist. They have and always will require guidance and assistance. If you think about it these individuals some of whom made a good living out of working for this Union seem to be ignorant of the fact this Union has always been involved in the representations I have previously mentioned, then you come to the conclusion that you must question if in the past they ever were interested, or got involved as they obviously do not understand that those duties of assistance I have related to are still with us today and without the Union and individuals who represent it there would be a void.

My mentors people like Mick McGahey, Eric Clarke always made sure you understood your duties and responsibilities as an NUM representative did not stop when you walked out of the pit gate.

Personally I am grateful for the support and assistance the Union has had over the sad and difficult last years from our NEC, local Branches, Trustees, MP's and many others as we strove to save what we had remaining of our industry.

We can be proud of the fight and campaign we led and although not successful we did as much as we could on behalf of the remaining miners to try and sustain and protect them and their families future, time will tell but it is my believe this country will live to regret the destruction of our Industry and not investing in Clean Coal and Carbon Capture.

The important thing is that this Union continues to operate in whatever way we evolve and continue the great work you all do day in day out in giving the representation I have referred to as long as there is a need.
