



The Coal Crisis

Author(s): T. I. Mardy Jones

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THE COAL CRISIS.

As a miner, I know of no period in the history of British coal-mining so eventful as the present year. The Eight Hours Coal Mines Act necessitates considerable changes in the working arrangements at the collieries. In every coalfield the Act has given rise to a large crop of minor disputes about the meal-times, overtime, and bonus wages of the datal workers. The resultant stoppage of work for several days at many collieries accounts for most of the decrease of 10 per cent. or so in the general output of coal as compared with July of last year. Another factor in the reduction is the fact that the miners, who usually take their annual holidays in May or June, did not do so this year as the trade outlook was threatening. Directly prospects brightened in July they rushed away at once. Full work will not be resumed till October, while most of the minor disputes will be amicably settled by then. But no real comparison of the output of coal before and after the coming of the Act can be made for at least a twelvemonth. It will require all that time for many collieries to adapt their mechanical equipments to the altered conditions. A year hence the normal output of coal in quantity and in cost of production will probably reveal little or no change in cost to consumers.

The recent coal crisis in South Wales arose out of the demand of the Coal-owners' Association to set aside the existing wage agreement which terminates March 31st, 1910, and to establish a new wage agreement to date from July 1st, 1909. They based their demand on the assumption that the Eight Hours Act is a legal abrogation of the wage agreement. The miners contested this interpretation, and stoutly refused to consider it. The coal-owners then claimed the right to introduce any changes in the methods of working whenever and wherever they found it suited their purpose to do so without the slightest consultation with the miners. Their chief proposal was to introduce a double shift of coal hewers, as obtains in some English and Scotch coalfields. The Welsh miners have rooted objections to the double shift on the grounds (1) that it increases the risks of accidents and explosions (the South Wales coal mines are very fiery); (2) that it would lead to an abnormal increase of output and so disturb the normal development of the South Wales coal trade. The miners were prepared to consider any cases of collieries with special circumstances, and to agree to double shift in such cases.

The coal-owners eventually agreed (after a dramatic sitting which lasted from noon till midnight of June 30th) to submit all proposed changes in methods of working to the miners' lodges for local mutual agreement. Should local negotiations fail, the matter is referred to the Joint Conciliation Board. Any proposal affecting safety only is referred to an arbitrator appointed by the Home Secretary. Should the Board fail to settle any other objections *re* wages or hours within two months, either party is then free to adopt the ultimate course of a month's notice to decide the dispute by strike or lock-out. This new agreement is co-terminous with the wage agreement, and both expire March 31st, 1910. Miners and mine-owners anticipate a severe struggle next March, as each party will bring forward demands of fundamental difference.

The Scotch coal crisis is also over. The coal-owners withdrew their demand for a $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. reduction, which would have brought wages down to 5s. 6d. a day, and they agreed to make the present rate of 6s. a day, equivalent to 50 per cent. on the 1888 basis, the standard minimum wage. The miners, on the other hand, agreed to abate any claim for an increase due on any increase in coal prices up to $6\frac{1}{4}$ per cent. should such increase take place before March 31st, 1910. The new agreement will remain in force until August 1st, 1912.

The outstanding feature of the Welsh and Scotch disputes was the decision to enforce the twentieth rule of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. The operation of this rule means that every coal district in the country comes out in a sympathetic strike with any of the affiliated coal districts which is attacked by the coal-owners on a question of wages. Hitherto the rule has been regarded as a pious expression only. But the crisis in South Wales was so acute and the Welsh delegation so resolved on its adoption, that the Miners' Federation of Great Britain decided to take a ballot of all its members on the matter. But before the ballot could be taken a settlement was effected, as outlined above. The ballot on the twentieth rule is believed to have had an influence on the settlement. The Welsh crisis over the Scotch dispute became acute, and the Scotch miners demanded that the twentieth rule should be put into operation in their case. This time the ballot was taken, and an overwhelming majority, 7 to 1, voted in favour of a sympathetic strike. The Welsh miners supported the project by a vote of 9 to 1. The result of the ballot reveals a remarkable change of temper and outlook among the miners. They claim that the ballot was the decisive

factor in the Scotch settlement. Flushed with this sense of power and victory, the miners are sure to use the twentieth rule in future whenever wages in any district are attacked. Hence the country is sure to be faced, sooner or later, with the terrible prospect of a national stoppage of our coal supplies, with its concomitant paralysis of national industry.

T. I. MARDY JONES

CENTRAL POOR LAW CONFERENCE. REPORT OF THE PROCEEDINGS
OF THE 37TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE, APRIL, 1909.¹

THE Conference of Guardians and officials which met at the Guildhall in April last was of special importance. It was entirely devoted to a discussion of the recommendations of the Royal Commission. Delegates were present from 271 Unions, and, in addition, there were a number of elected and co-opted representatives. Four papers were read. Mr. Bentham, of Bradford, put forward a summary of the Majority Report, of which he was one of the signatories. Mr. Manton, the Chairman of the Birmingham Board, dealt with the administrative proposals from the standpoint of a "progressive" Guardian. The Rev. G. Propert, of Fulham, discussed principles and methods of relief, voicing strict C.O.S. doctrine, and Mr. Leach, the Rochdale Clerk, reviewed the unemployment proposals of the Majority, and spent most of his time contending that, where they were not contradictory, they were superfluous. The reading of the papers was followed by a discussion, in which between forty and fifty delegates took part.

Neither papers nor speeches make any fresh contribution to the solution of specific problems. The proceedings are only important as revealing the attitude of leading Guardians to proposed changes. The Guardians would seem to be unanimous against their transformation into "authorities not directly elected for Poor Law purposes." "They were as one against Mr. Bentham." "If the thin end of the wedge were got in, Guardians, as such, were ruined." Next, almost every speaker had something to say against the Local Government Board. Either it did not advise enough and in time, or it interfered too much. Thirdly, many of the speakers were not aware of anything in the Poor Law calling for radical change. "There was no reason in the world . . . why Boards of Guardians up and down the country should be

¹ London: P. S. King and Son. Pp. xv + 187. 1s. net.