Annual Meeting
of the Trades Union Congress 1920.

The 52nd Annual Meeting of the Trades Union Congress, held at Portsmouth, from 6th to 11th September, brought together 950 delegates representing 6,505,482 organised workers. This represents an increase of nearly a million and a quarter on the previous year's figure and about two and a half millions on that of the year before the war. Mr J. H. Thomas, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, presided. The troubled industrial outlook, at that moment crystallised in the threat of a national coal strike, caused its proceedings to be followed with more than usual attention.

THE MINERS

The 'Miners' dispute was naturally the subject of greatest interest both to the general public and to the Congress itself, and considerable comment was caused by the fact that no reference was made to it either in the report or in the actual Congress proceedings.

The Chairman said that it had been suggested that it was for some sinister reason that the miners' question was not being raised in Congress. The position was this. The miners had put their case before the Triple Alliance and it had been unanimously endorsed. They did not ask Congress or the Parliamentary Committee to consider the matter, but on the other hand, they had no objection to stating their case to the Congress for the benefit of the public. "We are convinced — the Parliamentary Committee is convinced —, that, so far as the grave issues involved in this dispute are concerned, it is not for us to embitter the controversy and render settlement more difficult, but rather to do all we possibly can, keeping in mind the justice of the case, keeping in mind that justice must be
done to the miners, to explore every avenue and use all our influence to prevent a stoppage if possible." This was the reason he concluded, why the question had not appeared among the proceedings of the Congress.

The advisability of a statement of the miners' case being made to Congress was referred to the Standing Orders Committee and on their reporting in favour of such action Frank Hodges addressed the delegates.

He said that for the past six years the miners had been pursuing a dual policy of seeking to reduce the cost of living for the community generally and of trying to make their own wages keep pace with prices. At present there was a surplus of £ 92,000,000 of price over cost. The Government maintained that it should go to the Exchequer. The miners considered it monstrous that the profits of the industry should be appropriated to Governmental expenditure, especially when the community had no direct control over this expenditure. The miners' demands could be met and still leave a surplus of £ 8,000,000. "We claim," he concluded, "that the community should receive that benefit which the industry can give, consistent with the proper forward march of the economic status of the men engaged in the industry."

The Chairman proposed the following resolution which was carried unanimously:

"This Congress, having heard the statement of the miners' case for a reduction in the price of domestic coal of 14.2d. a ton and an advance of wages of 1/-, 1/- and of 9d. per shift for adults, youths and boys respectively, is of the opinion that the claims are both reasonable and just, and should be conceded forthwith."

THE COUNCIL OF ACTION AND RUSSIA

The Council of Action, set up on the 13th August by a special session of the Trades Union Congress and given extraordinary powers amounting to the calling of a general strike was dealt with fully in the Chairman's opening speech. He admitted it to be a definite challenge to the Constitution, and as such dangerous and requiring explanation. "I feel satisfied," he said, "that I speak for the whole of the movement when I say that dangerous as was our remedy — and it was dangerous — it was justified by the result. ...It cannot be denied that labour gave organised expression to public opinion and frustrated the desires of those of our statesmen who would drag this country at the tail of any foreign imperialist policy, even at the cost of war." The Council's mandate he continued, was to secure the complete independence of Poland and peace with Russia; that accomplished, it would be content with the result of its labours.

There was no debate on the subject and the following resolution, submitted by the Chairman, was adopted:

"That this Congress welcomes the formation of the Council of Action, and observes with satisfaction the efforts to prevent an
outbreak of war calculated to involve Great Britain and the contin­ued efforts to make peace between this country and Russia. It endorses the decision to send delegates to Riga, and calls on the Government to make all passport facilities to the British Labour delegation whose presence would be the best guarantee against any unjust and unwarrantable claim submitted by and on behalf of either Poland or Russia."

The report of the Labour Delegation to Russia was made by A. A. Purcell (Furnishing Trades.) He said that the visit had been of immense value because it showed what could be done in the next stage of emancipation of the working classes. Without committing themselves to the Soviet system of Government, trade unionists had much to thank the Russians for in developing a system by which the employer was eliminated.

A resolution, proposed by Robert Williams, (Transport Workers' Federation) was adopted, in which the Congress protested against the refusal of the British Government to allow a delegation of Russian Trade Unionists to visit Great Britain in order to investigate conditions, in spite of the fact that they had been invited to come by the British delegation to Russia, and had pledged themselves to refrain from propaganda during their visit.

Williams, while expressing no opinion on the Soviet system, declared that the action of the Government would do more to spread Soviet ideas here than any visit of Russian inquirers. Havelock Wilson, opposing the resolution, said that the procedure was nothing new and that he himself had been excluded from four or five countries owing to his trade union activities. He taunted Williams and others with inconsistency in opposing conscription in England for national defence and approving conscription for both work and war in Russia.

Robert Smillie retorted that he had always argued that conscription should be applied to wealth before it was applied to men, and that this has been done in Russia.

ORGANISATION

(a) The General Council.

At once the most marked and the most significant action taken by the Congress was the adoption of new plans of organization. Most important of these internal reforms was the approval of a scheme for a General Council to replace the Parliamentary Committee. The special Trades Union Congress held in December 1919 had laid down that there was imperative need of a central coordinating body, representative of the whole Trade Union movement and capable of dealing efficiently with industrial questions of national importance. Such a body would replace the Parliamentary Committee. The Trades Union Co-ordination Committee which had the drafting of the scheme proposed the formation of a Council of
30 members elected by 17 Trade Groups, later altered to 32 members and 18 Groups including two representatives of women trade unionists. These 32 members it proposed to divide into five sub-committees, which would be responsible for keeping contact with and collecting information from the unions which they represented. For that purpose full-time officials would be appointed. The work and functions of these committeess would nevertheless be subject to the control of the General Council.

Its objects were to be to keep watch on all industrial movements and where possible co-ordinate industrial action; promote common action on any general questions that might arise and assist any union attacked on any vital question of trade union principle; to use its influence to promote settlement of disputes between Trade Unions; assist in trade union organisation; carry on propaganda; and enter into relations with Trade Unions and Labour movements in other countries.

In the ensuing debate two main lines of criticism were distinguishable. The first criticism suggested that the scheme in some way involved an infringement of the liberty of individual unions. This objection was met at the outset by prefacing the plan with the words “Subject to the necessary safeguards to secure the complete autonomy of the unions and federations affiliated to Congress.” The second criticism, expressed very cogently by J. B. Clynes (General Workers’ Union), was to the effect that the new council was merely the Parliamentary Committee enlarged. Effective representation of all interest was impossible. They wanted the best men that could be appointed, regardless of what trades they represented. National action would still be sacrificed to sectional action and there would be no real co-ordination. Could they not have a national organisation which would answer the political and industrial purposes of their movement? C. T. Cramp (National Union of Railwaymen) supporting Clynes, feared that the proposed General Council would develop bureaucratic ways. On a vote the Congress adopted the general plan by a majority of over three million. The detailed execution of the project will, it is expected, occupy another twelve months, and consequently the General Council will not be actually set up until 1921.

(b) Relations with the Labour Party.

A definite step towards closer alliance with the Labour Party and a delimitation of functions between the Party and the Congress was made by the adoption of the following resolution.

“That the method of furthering Congress resolutions by deputations to Ministers is becoming less effective year by year, and is now almost obsolete. This Congress, therefore, instructs the Parliamentary Committee to consult the Labour Party Executive on resolutions requiring political action, and jointly decide on the
methods for furthering them. On resolutions of an industrial character, the Parliamentary Committee shall consult the unions concerned and decide on the steps to be taken."

Moving the resolution C. T. Cramp said that while they had gained in membership and therefore, prestige, they had not increased in effectiveness in the same degree. John Hill (Boilermakers) in seconding the resolution described how representatives saw the Ministers concerned but were put off time after time. They wanted to co-operate in this respect, to unify the whole of the movement.

(c) Trade Boards.

Further evidence of the general keenness of feeling in favour of co-ordination is to be found in the motion requesting the Parliamentary Committee to consult with the various unions of trades covered by Trade Boards with a view to co-ordinating both work and policy in that respect.

Miss M. Symons (National Federation of Women Workers) who introduced the resolution said that there were now over 40 Trade Boards covering about 3,000,000 workers. Representatives of the employees sometimes pressed for contradictory policies and it was desirable that experience and information should be pooled. The resolution was carried unanimously.

(d) Trade Union International.

At the instance of Robert Williams the following resolution was adopted with only three or four dissentient votes:

"That this Congress instructs the new Parliamentary Committee to take the necessary steps to determine that the British Trade Union Movement shall be affiliated to the International Trade Union Federation only through the Trades Union Congress and its Parliamentary Committee, and directs the Parliamentary Committee to refrain from co-operating with any sectional body which can only claim to represent a comparatively small minority, most of whom are moreover affiliated to this Congress."

The General Federation of Trade Unions was established by the Congress itself in 1899 exclusively for the purpose of accumulating a central fund for the relief of trade unions burdened by strike pay, dispute benefit, or other charges arising out of a trade dispute in which it was engaged, or by which its members were affected. Throughout its existence the membership has never been much above 1,000,000.

From its first inception, the General Federation of Trade Unions affiliated itself to the International Trade Union Federation and for some eighteen years it maintained in this way the only direct collective connection between the British trade union movement and the international trade union movement. The direct interest of the Trades Union Congress in international affairs dates from its 1917 meeting. At the last International Trade Union Federation Congress at Amsterdam,
8-10 April 1920, the Trade Union Congress and the General Federation of Trade Unions were equally represented and W. A. Appleton (General Secretary of the General Federation of Trades Unions) was chosen President of the International Trade Union Federation.

The debate resolved itself into a denunciation of a system by which an organisation with a membership of 1,000,000 purported to represent the British Trade Union movement abroad and into an attack on Appleton prompted by his criticism of the policy of the Triple Alliance. The Congress voted overwhelmingly in favour of the resolution. No change however, will be made in the British representation for the meeting of the International Trade Union Federation Congress to be held in November, or until the next statutory meeting of the International Trade Union Bureau.

(e) Bartering of Votes.

Early in the proceedings Robert Smillie (Miners) had voiced a protest against the practice of the bartering of votes for the election of the Parliamentary Committee, in which he received the hearty support of the Congress. After the actual declaration of the results of the voting, with his own name sixth on the list, he startled the Congress by declaring that in spite of the attention drawn to the practice bartering of votes had nevertheless taken place. On his motion a Committee of Inquiry was unanimously appointed and until they report the old Parliamentary Committee is continuing in office.

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION

Relative to this subject the Parliamentary Committee says in the general introduction to its Report:

"The Washington gathering was not only unique from the international standpoint, but without parallel, and, as will be gathered from the short statement of the Conference’s work appearing in another portion of this report, the results exceeded anticipations. It was indeed remarkable that, with representatives of the most backward nations (from an industrial standpoint) brought into consultation for the first time with representatives of the most highly developed nations questions affecting the industrial workers of the world should have been discussed with such keenness, and with a genuine desire on the part of the former to bring their countries into line industrially with the more advanced and better organised countries. Common agreement was reached on many of the most essential subjects discussed, and it now remains for the various Governments to give legislative effect to the recommendations resulting from the Conference."

A general resolution endorsing the Washington Conventions
was moved by Miss Margaret Bondfield (National Federation of Women Workers) in the following terms:

"That this Congress, believing that the Draft Conventions adopted by the International Labour Conference at Washington in November 1919, constitute a foundation for sound international legislation, although of opinion that they fall far short of the necessity of the times, calls upon the Government to give effect to all the Draft Conventions, and to introduce immediately the necessary Bills, and to give full facilities for their passage into law; in particular, it urges the Government to carry out the Convention concerning the employment of women before and after childbirth by introducing provisions in this Bill providing benefits for mother and child on a universal and non-contributory basis."

Miss Bondfield protested vigorously against the action of the Government in shelving the question of the employment of women before and after childbirth. British law in this connection, she said, was most unsatisfactory. The question was not merely an industrial one, but a vital race-question. The inaction of the Government had aroused keen resentment. It was a disgrace that this country should be led away from laying the foundations of international law in these matters. The Government should adopt not only Conventions for which it contended but all conventions adopted by majority decisions.

The resolution was seconded formally, and adopted without further discussion.

Later in the week the following resolution, also moved by Miss Bondfield, was adopted unanimously:

"That this Congress welcomes the Women, Young Persons and Children (Employment) Bill in so far as it carries out the provisions of the Washington Conventions, but strongly protests against Clause 2 of this Bill, enabling women and young persons to work two shifts beginning at 6 a.m. and ending at 10 p.m. It draws attention to the prolongation of working hours, to the pre-breakfast work, and to the increased facilities for evasion involved; and condemns the legislation of such a mischievous and retrograde system of work in a Bill ostensibly introduced to carry out certain of the Washington Conventions."

Further to the subject of the International Labour Organisation a letter from M. Albert Thomas (Director of the International Labour Office of the League of Nations) was read. M. Thomas congratulated the Congress on its wonderful growth in numbers and influence. He regarded it as essential that the closest and most cordial relations should be maintained between it and the International Labour Organisation as there was hardly an item on the Congress agenda in which the International Labour Office was not directly interested. On some of these subjects the Washington Conference had already achieved progress and he thanked the Congress for recognising this both in their report and in their resolutions moved. While keenly realising that the Organisation falls short of the full desires of the organised
workers he assured them that the same motives inspired both
movements and that with their aid and allowed a fair chance
the Organisation would do much to uplift the standard of
working life the world over.

HOURS OF LABOUR

(a) Seamen.

The following resolution was adopted unanimously:

"That the Parliamentary Committee be requested to use all
their influence and to give their support to the inclusion of seamen
in the Hours of Labour Bill for a 48-hour working week now
before Parliament, and to see that seamen have the same conditions
as to hours of labour as the working-men in other industries."

Mr Mc Vey (Sailors' and Firemen's Union) in moving the re-
solution referred to the British Government's opposition to
the Draft Conventions proposed at the International Labour
Conference held at Genoa, when the Convention on Hours of
Labour for Seamen failed to secure the requisite majority by a
fraction of a vote.

(b) Agricultural Workers.

The Congress also adopted the following resolution proposed
by the Agricultural Workers' Union:

"That this Congress hereby resolves to give their support to
the demand of the agricultural workers to be included in the scope
of the Hours of Employment Bill, and further, protests against the
delay on the part of the Government in giving effect to their
pledge in connection with the matter."

UNEMPLOYMENT

The friction which has arisen between the trade unions on the
one hand and the Government and friendly societies on the
other, in regard to the administration of the Unemployment
Insurance Act (*) recently passed was the subject of an incon-
cclusive debate. On 23 March 1920, the Parliamentary Com-
nittee of the Congress passed a resolution warning the Govern-
ment that if friendly societies were allowed to administer the
Unemployment Benefit, the Committee would be compelled
to recommend that the whole trade union movement refuse to
have anything to do with the Act. When the question came
before the Congress, the Chairman declared that the unions
did not intend to abate their claim that the administration of
unemployment benefit was their business. Several delegates
contended that it was useless to refuse to work the Act; other­
wise when it came into operation (November 8th) the friendly

(*) For text of the British Unemployment Insurance Act, see For ana-
lysis of Act and steps leading to its enactment see.
societies would rob them of their members. It was also asserted that, whatever might be said by the Congress, many unions would decide to work the Act. In spite of this opposition, the Congress adopted a resolution to the effect that unions should not recognise the Act.

A composite resolution on Unemployment moved by Tom Mann (Amalgamated Engineers) in the following terms was adopted by a large majority:

"Recognising that irregularity of employment and the loss of wages arising therefrom is the chief cause of social distress, involving low wages and continuous poverty for a large section of the workers, and believing that, by the proper organisation of industry, unemployment could be eliminated, this Congress declares that responsibility for unemployment shall be borne by the industry and that, in no case, should the level of income fall below 85 per cent of the wages earned when in full employment.

In order to raise the necessary funds, power should be obtained to force a levy on the industry; and, further, Congress hereby instructs the Parliamentary Committee to take such action as may be deemed necessary to obtain amendments in existing legislation or to secure the introduction of further legislation towards that end."

Mann declared that unemployment was due to industry being conducted for profit, and the cure would be found when it was conducted for use.

COST OF LIVING

Arthur Greenwood, Secretary of the Joint Committee on the Cost of Living presented an interim report dealing with the factors which have disturbed the level of prices as a whole. He summarised the Committee main findings. The rise in prices was attributable to currency expansion rather than to contraction of production. Deflation of the currency was therefore the first step. This would mean a reduction of perhaps 20% on general prices. A development of productive capacity, obtainable by the participation of all countries in the world's trade, improvement of methods and machinery and a far-reaching re-organisation of industry, was the only way in which a substantial fall could be safely brought about.

Regarding present exigencies the Report recommended that index numbers of prices should be superseded by new index numbers based upon the prices prevailing since the armistice; the amount of paper currency should be controlled by legislation; Government should cease to resort to bank credits to meet expenditure; and the floating debt should be wholly or largely repaid, and the remainder, if any, funded. The banking system of the country should be publicly controlled. Government expenditure upon military and naval enterprises should cease. From the international aspect peace, fixing of indemnities, rehabilitation of currencies, introduction of a new parity of exchange where retention of the gold standard
was impracticable, institution of direct bartering where no other means of trading was possible and a League of Nations loan to aid impoverished countries were the most urgent necessities. The Committee expressed its conviction that the high cost of living is largely due to the defects and weaknesses of the industrial system.

A Resolution was adopted requiring the Parliamentary Committee to prepare a policy on the subject, which policy is to be submitted to the unions and, if approved, adequate steps taken to put it into force.

HOUSING AND RENTS

C. R. Blake (Bookbinders and Machine Rulers) moved that the Congress should declare that the housing of the working classes is not possible under the system of private ownership of land and dwellings and "instruct the Parliamentary Committee to oppose any increase of rent beyond 10% of the standard rent, until the normal supply of houses is available". C. T. Cramp regarded the proposal as impracticable and likely to result in slums and unsanitary dwellings. Some people, he said, were not satisfied that 10% increase on the standard rent would pay for repairs. Hicks (Building Trades) said that building workers were as desirous that more houses should be built as any section of the community. They had offered to allow overtime to be worked and made other suggestions without effect. He urged that more men should be taken off luxury building and building undertaken to reduce excess profits duty and be put on to housing.

Strong opposition was manifested against the resolution but on a card vote a majority of nearly a million declared in its favour.

LEVY ON WAR WEALTH

The following resolution moved by J. R. Clynes was adopted unanimously:

"That this Congress condemns the failure to acquire the war wealth into which special inquiry was made by a responsible Committee; and declares that conditions of national finance, taxation, and prices require an immediate capital levy.

Congress is of the opinion that the interest on the National Debt is such an enormous burden on the industry of the country that it will inflict serious hardship upon the working classes by diminishing the purchasing power of wages, while it will enrich financiers, who will derive large permanent incomes; we therefore urge the Government to impose a levy upon wealth and capital to pay off the great war debt and relieve labour from the misery which must be inflicted upon future generations by extracting from wages the amount demanded in interest on the debt, and urge the Parliamentary Committee to press forward this demand upon the Government."

Supporting the resolution Clynes said that labour advocated the policy of a general levy on capital to solve the financial
difficulties raised by the war and also the Government appropriation of a large part if not all of that wealth improperly made during the war. To win the war life was not 'loaned'; it was taken. To win the peace money should be taken and not loaned.

EDUCATION

Declaring it to be the most important resolution before Congress A. W. Lapp (Shipwrights) moved that the Education Acts should be amended to provide that every child deserving and qualifying for secondary education should receive it, including maintenance. The resolution was supported by several speakers including Will Thorne M. P. who said the Government should relieve local authorities by paying for education wherever the cost rose to more than the one shilling rate. The resolution was passed unanimously.

MISCELLANEOUS

Among resolutions of less importance the Congress pronounced in favour of nationalisation of the liquor trade, "unionising" of all places of amusement, and reinstatement of Belfast trade-unionists expelled from work for religious or political opinions. It passed resolutions against the political disabilities of Civils Servants being applied to dockers; condemned the employment of Chinese Labour on ships; protested against discrimination being made between certificated and uncertificated teachers as regards salary and general conditions; and declared that classes run by employers should not be held as the equivalent of continuation schools under the Education Act. A resolution demanding the release of the Lord Mayor of Cork which was not voted upon, speeches from fraternal delegates, a debate on the electricians' strike and lock-out and a charge of "black-legging" between unions were other incidents exciting considerable interest.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that this Congress will remain famous in the annals of British Trade Unionism for the internal reforms effected. The creation of the General Council to keep touch with and at the same time co-ordinate the whole Trade Union movement, the resolution favouring co-operation with the Labour Party in the furthering of Congress resolutions, the definite stand taken with regard to the representation of British Trade Unionism in international meeting and the resolute action against bartering of votes are all matters of first importance.

Even more remarkable is the evidence of a change in spirit that has come over the Congress, manifested in an increased
restraint and sobriety of expression. It would seem to be directly attributable to the increasing consciousness of the great responsibility which its enormous power entails. The following extract from the Chairman's address admirably illustrates this.

"The financial strain the country is to-day bearing, and which must continue for many years to come, is, although not a popular subject, of vital consideration to all sections of our people, and to none more than the working classes. The dependency of our country upon and from the markets of the world means that a collapse of our credit would result in starvation, and at a time when this certain and pregnant fact is inclined to be overlooked, certainly not receiving the serious consideration it should do, no apology is needed for reminding a party that rightly aspire to the government of the nation to keep it in mind. It may be inconvenient to remind people of the fact, but they would be the first to condemn any party who blindly moulded its policy and pursued its course regardless of so dangerous a precipice. Governments may continue to manufacture paper credits, private firms cannot meet their obligations in the same easy way. They may borrow, but the result to both will be the same—ruin. Don't let us, in our demand for social justice, forget or ignore this fact."

An incident that occurred during the proceedings has a similar significance. In the course of a discussion a delegate interjected the suggestion of 'a general strike', whereupon the chairman turned upon him with the remark that threats of a general strike lose their effectiveness 'when people are always talking about it and don't do it.' The Congress endorsed the rebuke with its cheers.

The concluding speech from the chair showed this spirit of responsibility in stronger relief than ever. Referring to the impending coal strike, Thomas urged:

"Don't let us during the next few weeks do or say anything that will render a settlement more difficult. Let us realise that we are at a stage where every word should be carefully weighed, every action deliberately thought out, and whilst we are determined to have justice for our own class, we are equally determined to keep in mind the interests of the whole community."