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Seamen's Chronicle

Mar 6, 1907

GREAT CONFERENCE OF BRITISH AND FOREIGN SEAMEN.

Delegates Present from Many Lands.

TRENCHANT SPEECH BY MR. J.HAVELOCK WILSON, M.P.

ALL THE UNION OFFICIALS IN LONDON.

Resolutions upon the manning of British Vessels, Certificates for Seamen, etc., unanimously passed.

An international Conference of sailors and firemen was held in the Large Hall of the Club & Institute Union on Friday and Saturday last. The Conference assembled at 9.30.a.m. Mr. J.Havelock Wilson, M.P., President of the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, presided. He was supported on the platform by Mr. L.C.Jansens (the representative of the Belgian Seamen), Mr. John de Vries (Holland), Mr. Allan May and Mr. A. Stormer (representatives of the German seamen), Mr. T.Rathier (President of the French Seamen's Union), Mr. Nebel (representative of the Marseilles seamen); also Jas. Sexton (Gen.Sec. of the Liverpool dockers), Mr. Kellerman (of Hamburg dockers), and Mr. Smolfelt (representative of the Bremen dockers.) There was also a large number of Members of Parliament present, amongst whom were Captain Donelan, M.P. and Mr. W.S. Robson, M.P. (of South Shields) John Wilson, M.P. (Govan), Mr. Ed. Cathery (of the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union) and Mr. H.Brill (President of the Coal Porters' Union).

The following delegates were present:-

ABERDEEN	J.O'Connor, W. Frase.
ANTWERP	L.C.Jansens.
BARRY	James Mace, W.Sines
BELFAST	James Newal.
BRISTOL	C.Jarman, A.Birt, W.Jeffrey, J.Humphries.
CARDIFF	T.Carey, A.Chubbs, J.Bayes J.W.Davies.
GLASGOW	A.Thomson, J.McLean, A.McEvan, J.McKinvar.
GRANGEMOUTH	P.Wheelaghan, J.Laird.
GREEN'S HOME	H.J.Barker, -- Williams, T.Sparks.
Grimsby	W.Bennett, G.King (Fishing Engs) W.Riding, A.Wickett, E.Chafer.
HAMBURG	A.May, A.Stormer.
HULL	G.Jackson, W.Brown
JARROW	J.R.Scott
LIVERPOOL	W.Kinley
MANCHESTER	J.Rogers
MIDDLESBROUGH	G.Cathey, W.Lyons, J.Mucklow, J.Ayton, J.Nash.
NEWPORT	D.Bowen, --Wheelan, --Buckler, -- Morgan, -- Bailey.
NEWCASTLE	S.Johnson.
QUEENSTOWN	J.Hart
ROTTERDAM	J.de Vries
SHIELDS (North)	W.Brown
SHIELDS (South)	D.Clements, J.Parsons, T.Temple.
SWANSEA	G.Vickerson
SUNDERLAND	J.Q.Battye
TIDAL BASIN	George Cowie.
WEST HARTLEPOOL.	E.Potton, T.Greathead, E.Brockelby,
MARSEILLES	H.Murray, T.Sampson, T.Gorman, C.Sideway, W.Phillips, J.Henson. T.Rathier.

The President (Mr. Wilson, M.P) called upon Mr. E.Cathery to read the correspondence and letters of apology, and also the names of the delegates.

The President then opened the Congress, and said he was delighted to have the pleasure of welcoming the delegates to one of the most important Conferences of seamen ever held in this or any other country. He was also pleased to announce that they had delegates present from almost every port in the United Kingdom, also French representatives in the person of J.Rathier, President of the French National Seamen's Union, and Mr. Nebel of the French Union at Marseilles, Mr. L.C.Jansens, who represented the seamen of Belgium, and Mr. John de Vries, who represented the seamen of Holland, and he was also pleased to say that Germany was well represented by Mr. Allan May and Mr. A.Stormer. He was well pleased to have the extreme pleasure of presiding over such an important Conference, especially as they had the representatives of other countries present who would be able to tell of the movements in progress in their own countries with the object of the ameliorating the conditions of all seamen. Itought also to be a source of satisfaction to British shipowners who had been asked to legislate for the better protection of life and property on the high seas that other countries are doing the same thing.

The English shipowner was continually complaining of his trade being fettered and crippled by Acts of Parliament, and he talked so as to make the public believe that shipowning was the one trade that legislation hampered and crippled; and here he (Mr. Wilson) might say, from conversations he had had that morning with his Continental friends, that this was the stock argument of the Foreign shipowners, and their general complaint was that the English shipowners had more freedom, and were consequently betterable to compete with shipowners of other countries. It would be as well if they considered for a moment whether there were any grounds for these complaints as to legislation which had been enacted. He said, as far as he could see, there had been few measures added to the Statute book for the protection of seamen (hear,hear) - not more than three which he could recall to mind at that moment. First the Load Line Act, and the powers given to the Board of Trade for the detention of unseaworthy ships; then, from 1880 to 1884 the Grain Cargoes Act, and 1887 the Life-saving Appliances Act passed; and in 1890 and 1891 they had the Life Saving Appliances Act and a Bill for the Inspection of Provisions.

Shipowners had objected to Government placing a mark on the side of the ships indicating that they should be prevented from loading their ships beyond a point which was likely to endanger the lives of the men on board. So beneficial had been that Act - and they must never forget the name of that great and glorious philanthropist, Mr. Samuel Plimsoll (loud cheers), who had, in face of tremendous opposition, compelled a hostile Parliament to legislate with a view of preventing overloading - that thousands of lives had been saved.

It would be a source of satisfaction to them to know, and also for Mr. Samuel Plimsoll, that other countries were following in his footsteps.

The Norwegian Parliament had already passed a measure approving of a Load Line for Norwegian ships, and M. Rathier, the President of the French Seamen's Union, had informed him of the vigorous agitation that was being promoted in France with the same view. Holland and Belgium were also demanding legislation upon this question, so that the time was not far distant when all the principal maritime nations would adopt the Load Line, and he (Mr. Wilson) would go further and establish an International law, so that ships in other countries that theirs could be detained, and those responsible punished for taking a vessel to sea from any port, or for attempting

to do so, without the proper mark. He thought that as other countries were beginning to recognise the necessity of such legislation there ought to be little difficulty in getting an International law for the detaining of overladen vessels.

The Grain Cargoes Act had been a most useful one, and he could not see that shipowners had much to complain of.

The Life-Saving Appliances Act had been useful in its way but, in his opinion, it did not go far enough, for although it provided a certain number of boats and life-saving appliances to be carried, it did not provide for the proper inspection of these equipments, and shipowners could not complain about the manner in which this Act was enforced, as he (Mr. Wilson) knew a good many cases where the inspection of these appliances had not taken place for two years; the result was that these boats were worthless, and the gear useless at the very time when, perhaps, it was needed most. Mr. Wilson then dealt at considerable length with the Inspection of Ships' Provisions Act, pointing out that if it was necessary to give protection to those on shore against bad provisions when they had the privilege to purchase where they liked, it was surely more important for seamen, seeing that they had no say in the purchase of their food and did not get an opportunity of inspecting its quality until they had started on their voyage, and no matter how inferior they were bound to put up with it.

Apart from the measures he had mentioned there had been nothing practically done for the seamen. They were cheated out of the protection of the Employers' Liability Act, and he considered no body of employers had escaped legislative interference more than the shipowners.

Mine owners, etc. since 1870 had brought in continuous amendments, etc. to the laws connected with their trades, and yet they did not shriek and yell with rage, and in fact they were generally to be found on the side of legislators interfering with these laws, and as far as possible tried to make these Acts realities, and it was amusing to see that certain shipowners who were continually shrieking against trade being legislated upon, were always to the front for factories, mines and workshops.

They were there that day to consider their position with regard to the Manning question, and he was pleased to know that all the representatives of other countries present would try to force their Governments to declare under-manning as unseaworthy, and urging for an International Code of Manning Scales. It was with regret he had to report to them the refusal of Her Majesty's Government to bring in a Bill embodying the recommendations of the recent Committee appointed to enquire into the Manning of Ships.

Mr. Ritchie, President of the Board of Trade, had said his reason for this was that he did not think it practical to establish a hard and fast manning scale, which practically amounted to this, that Mr. Ritchie thought himself a greater expert upon shipping matters than Sir Digby Murray, the nautical expert, Sir E.J. Reed, Ingram B. Walker, Sir Francis Evans, shipowner, Mr. Smith, deputy Minister of Marine, Canada with 14 years' experience, Mr. Wallace and Mr. Wakefield, two underwriters of great experience, Captain Davidson, practical seaman, Mr. H. Sinclair, practical engineer, Doctor Raikes, a practical shipping barrister with experience at sea; and also three practical seamen. He could hardly believe that Mr. Ritchie had expressed his own opinion when he said that it was not practicable to fix a manning scale (hear, hear). He believed he had been guided by the four men who had signed the

Minority Report from their self-interested and selfish point of view. Mr. Wilson said in consequence he was compelled to move the adjournment of the House, and after the matter had been debated for some considerable time, the President of the Board of Trade promised to bring in a Bill making under manning unseaworthiness. Mr. Wilson was sorry that he would not go further, but he (Mr. Wilson) thought that it would be wise in their interest to accept this as an instalment, and with the intention of urging upon the Government the necessity of defining what under-manning really was, and also dealing with the efficiency as well as the number of the men. It was important that their ships should not only be sufficiently manned but efficiently as well, and he trusted that a Bill would be introduced that would declare inefficiency as unseaworthiness, because a ship might carry large numbers of seamen and still be unseaworthy.

There were several resolutions to discuss, and he trusted they would discuss them practically and in a business-like manner. There were several members of Parliament present to hear and ascertain the views of the seamen on the Under-manning question, and they would be pleased to hear what they had to say. (Cheers.)

THANKS TO THE MANNING COMMITTEE.

The Conference proceeded with the orders of the day, when Mr. E. Potton (Tidal Basin Branch) moved the following resolution:-

"That this Conference of Sailors and Firemen, representing the seamen of the whole of the ports of the United Kingdom, regard with unqualified satisfaction the termination of the labours of the Committee appointed by the Board of Trade to inquire into the Manning of British Merchant Ships, and desires to place upon record our hearty thanks to the majority of such Committee for their unbiassed fair-minded and practical recommendations."

This was seconded by Mr. Mucklow (Middlesbro') and supported by Messrs. D. Clements (South Shields), G. Vickerson (Stockton), J. Hart (Queenstown, Ireland), C. Jarman (Bristol) and carried unanimously.

A PLEA FOR LEGISLATION.

Mr. William Kinley (Liverpool), in a lucid and able speech, next proposed the following resolution:-

"That this Conference of sailors and firemen learns with regret that Her Majesty's Government have intimated, through the President of the Board of Trade, that notwithstanding the specific recommendations of the majority of the Manning Committee to provide by Statute for the imposition of a fixed compulsory scale for the proper manning of British merchant vessels, they intend during the present Session of Parliament, only to deal partially with such recommendations by promising to bring in a Bill declaring insufficient manning to constitute unseaworthiness. This Conference therefore strongly urges upon Her Majesty's Government to also include in such proposed Bill that inefficient manning also be deemed to constitute unseaworthiness."

This was seconded by Mr. Fraser (Aberdeen) and supported by Messrs. J. Rathier (President of the French Seamen's Union), Mr. W. S. Robson, M.P. (South Shields) Capt a Donelan, M.P. (Cork), J. Stormer (Hamburg), L. Jansens (Antwerp), J. Mace (Barry) and carried unanimously.

SEAMEN'S CERTIFICATES.

Mr. W. Brown (North Shields) moved the following resolution:-

"That this Conference of sailors and firemen is of opinion that the time has arrived when the Merchant Shipping Act should be so amended as to provide that all able-bodied seamen and sea-going firemen possessing the necessary qualifications and showing the necessary servitude, shall be granted Certificates in lieu of the present obsolete method of Seamen's Discharges, and therefore calls upon Her Majesty's Government to offer facilities for the passing of a Bill into law embodying such provisions."

This was seconded by M. C. Jarman (Bristol), and supported by Messrs. E. Garrity (Financial Secretary Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants), W. Bennett (Grimsby), D. Bowen (Newport), J. Q. Battye (Swansea) ~~Bennet~~ Mucklow (Middlesbro') Fraser (Aberdeen), Chubbs (Cardiff) and carried unanimously.

WAGES AND HOURS OF WORK.

Mr. Barker (Green's Home) moved the following resolutions:-

"That this Conference of sailors and firemen~~s~~ is of the opinion that seamen of all nationalities in all parts of the world should unite with all other ship, dock and river workers, for the purpose of demanding uniform rates of wages and uniformity of working hours in accordance with programme of the International Conference of the International Federation of Ship, Dock and River Workers and the delegates now assembled pledge themselves to use every possible effort to make such a movement a decisive and permanent success."

This was seconded by Mr. Buckley (Newport) and supported by Messrs. G. Cathey (Middlesbro') and Rogers (Manchester) C. Jarman (Bristol), Bennett (Grimsby), Jackson (Hull), Potton (Tidal Basin), Battye (Swansea) and carried unanimously.

The Conference adjourned at 5 o'clock to re-assemble next morning.

S A T U R D A Y ' S C O N F E R E N C E

On Saturday morning the whole of the delegates re-assembled at 10 o'clock, Mr. J. Havelock Wilson, M.P. again presided. There was also present Mr. J. Wilson, M.P. (Govan)

STEAM TRAWLERS.

It was moved by Mr. W. Bennett, of Grimsby, and seconded by Mr. Fraser (Aberdeen) that Mr. J. H. Wilson, M.P. draft and lay before Parliament a Bill for the purpose of granting Certificates to steam-trawl fishing engineers and others engaged in this important industry. This was supported by Messrs. W. Brown (North Shields), Brown (Hull) Vickerson (Stockton) and carried unanimously.

SHIPPING MASTERS, ETC.

A resolution of an important character, bearing upon Shipping Masters, etc. was unanimously resolved upon.

THE MEMBER FOR GOVAN.

The Chairman at this juncture introduced Mr. J. Wilson, M.P. (Govan), who heartily congratulated the delegates upon the representative character and importance. He said he had not been present long enough to enter into a discussion of the numerous subjects which they had been dealing with, but he assured the delegates that he had always felt a deep sympathy for seamen, that he had watched their representative in the House of Commons with great interest pursuing his work on their behalf, and he assured the Conference that he could be relied upon to assist them in the general amelioration of the conditions of the men who followed the profession of seamen (cheers).

Mr. A. Thomson (Glasgow) moved, and Mr. McEvan (Glasgow) seconded a hearty vote of thanks to the member for Govan, who briefly acknowledged the same and retired.

ANOTHER CONFERENCE TO BE HELD.

It was moved by Mr. E. Potton (Tidal Basin) that a Special Conference of all the officials of the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland be held in the month of June to discuss and, if possible, come to a decision as to plans for the carrying out of Internationalisation in support of the wages demands. This was seconded by Mr. D. Bowen (Newport) supported by several delegates, and carried unanimously.

Multum in parvo.

The Conference proceeded upon an interesting discussion with reference to a proposed new system of seamen's wages accounts, also upon the subject of the representation of sailors and firemen upon Local Marine Boards. Attention was also given as to the best methods to be adopted for extending the sale and securing advertisements for the Seamen's Chronicle. Mr. E. Cathery, Gen. Sec., intimated to the delegates that it was desirable that they should become acquainted with Mr. Tom Chambers, the Clerk to the Central Council of the International Federation, so that they might in future know that gentleman personally.

Mr. Tom Chambers, at the request of the Conference, then delivered a brief spirited address to the delegates, after which this unique and important Conference came to an end with cheers for the President and General Secretary, and final cheers for the Union.

LETTERS OF APOLOGY.

Mr. E. Cathery then read a large number of letters and telegrams from which we extract the following:-

What the Irish Leader says,

"House of Commons, Feb. 23rd 1897.

"Dear Sir - In reply to your letter of February 19th, I regret to say that owing to previous engagements it will not be possible for me to be present at the meeting of the sailors and firemen of the various ports of the United Kingdom on the 26th instant. I may say, however, that the demands of the sailors and firemen have the warmest sympathy of the Irish Party, and that you can count upon the support of our party for any movement to secure the protection sought for. I have no doubt that our party will be represented at your meeting. - Yours sincerely, "JOHN DILLON."

From the Parnellite Leader -

"House of Commons, February 26th, 1897.

"Dear Sir - I am in receipt of the 19th instant, and while it would give me great pleasure to be of any assistance to the Sailors and Firemen's Union, it is quite impossible for me to attend the Conference in London. I will always be glad in the House of Commons to forward the interests of the Union. Very truly yours, - J.E.REDMOND."

Mr. J.D.Frovand says " I will do all I can to make the Bill on Under-manning as effective as possible."

Mr. Johnson. M.P. Ballikilbeg, regretted he could not attend the Conference.

Mr. J.J.Clancey, M.P. regretted his inability to attend but said - "I will gladly do whatever I can to help your Society."

Letters of apology were also read from Messrs. Parker Smith, M.P. David Randell, M.P., Sir Elliott Lees, M.P., Sir John Llewelyn, M.P. J.G.A.Baird, M.P., Mr. Corbett, M.P., David Brymar Jones, m.P., Sir Jas Haslett, M.P., and others.
