

1890.
NEW ZEALAND.

THE LABOUR DISPUTE ON WEST COAST OF MIDDLE ISLAND

(CORRESPONDENCE RELATIVE TO).

Laid on the Table by the Hon. Mr. Fergus, with the Leave of the House.

No. 1.

The Hon. the PREMIER to MESSRS. LOMAS and NEWTON.

GENTLEMEN,—

Premier's Office, Wellington, 18th August, 1890.

With reference to your letter of last Saturday evening, and to your query as to how a Royal Commission can help the miners out of their difficulty, I have the honour to state that, from the nature of the difficulty which has arisen, the Government are unable directly to render assistance. All they can do is, by a full inquiry into the whole subject, to ascertain whether the amount levied for royalty and freight by them is excessive, which can only be done in the manner already indicated to you.

The Government propose to appoint a Royal Commission in consequence of your request that the State should remit 6d. per ton of the 2s. 6d. now paid to the Government in royalty, and for freight by railway from the mines to the harbour. This, as I have informed you, the Government can only do with the sanction of Parliament, and that sanction cannot be asked without at the same time affording Parliament the fullest information as to the position of matters at the mines, and the causes which have led to the present deplorable difficulty.

As I understand the question, from representations made by you, and the statements of the company, the position is this: In March of this year the miners, being dissatisfied with their position, determined to alter the mode and rate of payment for getting coal. After some negotiation the company accepted the miners' terms as a trial. The new rate continued from March to June, when the company declined to continue to work on the new terms, alleging that they were losing at the rate of about £250 per week, and offering to permit the examination of their books by an expert appointed by the miners to ascertain the truth or otherwise of their statement. This examination took place, and I understand it is now admitted by you that the work cannot continue at the present rates without serious loss to the company. It is therefore proposed by the miners to reduce their price for getting the coal by 2d. per ton, and to ask the Government to remit 6d. in royalty or railway freight—making 8d. in all—at which rate it is thought the company will be willing to resume work on certain conditions. This proposal, as you will see, opens up two very large questions all over the colony—viz., railway freight and royalties.

It is impossible for the Government to touch either question without the fullest knowledge of all the circumstances of the case, and the Government know of no way of obtaining such information except by a full inquiry on the spot by a Royal Commission. The Commission will therefore, if appointed, certainly, amongst other things, have to inquire into the amount of wages earned by the miners, as well as the profits made by the company, and the rates of freight paid by land and sea, &c.

The Government have no intention in any way to interfere between the company and the miners, and they have only proposed to inquire into the matter when, as trustees of public property, they have been asked by yourselves, as representing the miners, to forego certain revenues belonging to the public. This, as I have said, it is impossible for them to do without strong reasons being shown to Parliament which would justify such action.

Messrs. Lomas and Newton, Wellington.

I have, &c.,

H. A. ATKINSON.

No. 2.

MESSRS. LOMAS and NEWTON to the Hon. the PREMIER.

SIR,—

Wellington, 16th August, 1890.

Your memorandum of even date just to hand, and, in reply, we beg to say that we are at a loss to know how such a Commission can help us out of our present difficulty. We should, however, esteem it a favour if you would kindly give us some idea of the nature of this Commission.

1—H. 52.