

291. There is a considerable amount?—Yes; it has a firm hold.

292. You admit that it is better than New Zealand?—No; but it is the only competitor we have.

293. *Mr. Carson.*] You said the price in Wellington is higher because you have to deliver it up the hills?—The question was that we could not sell at 3s. a ton less.

294. Have you two prices—one for the flat, and one for the hills?—No.

295. Then poor people on the flat have to pay for the rich people on the hills?—In Wellington the poor people pay £2 a ton for the coal, simply because they take it in such small quantities.

296. Supposing they take a full ton, they have to pay the same price as the people on the hills?—Yes.

297. *The Chairman.*] Of course you understand the object of this inquiry. We want to ascertain, if possible, the best method of cheapening coal. Coal, as you will understand, is an important commodity to everybody, and it is an important thing to the colony if we could discover a method whereby we could land it at a cheaper rate. Can you give us any idea how it could be done—how a saving could be accomplished?—I am afraid under the present conditions that it would be almost impossible to reduce the price. I will give you the Blackball Company's price. I was going to take them item by item. Take the cost of the hewing rate at the mine; that is fixed by arbitration at 2s. 3d.: we must pay that. The aerial tramway is worked at the lowest possible point, costing 4½d. per ton for three miles. We have then to go by railway sixteen miles to Greymouth, for which we pay 2s. 6d., so that the railway rate is much more than the aerial tramway worked by our company, ton for ton. Then there is 6d. royalty. The overhead charges of 1s. 8d. we cannot reduce; it includes the annual interest allowed on the debentures. ½d. a ton we have to pay to the Miners' Accident Fund. Marine insurance we must pay; there is no room to reduce that. The next item is the freight. I have put it down at the Union Company's rate of 6s. 3d. We would have to pay that if we did not run boats. If it were possible to work larger boats that might be reduced, but, on the other hand, we could not reduce under present conditions.

We'll give you an illustration: On Saturday last two steamers arrived together, and, owing to their being blocked by the bar being unworkable, it was impossible to obtain any trucks until those already loaded had been discharged, and one boat had to stop till Tuesday night for a cargo. That expense was £100, and must be added on to the expense of working that cargo. The bars are bad, and unless we have a considerable addition to the rolling-stock we should not be able to use much larger boats. Then there is no getting out of the railrage and wharfage. We discharge in trucks at Wellington at about 3d. a ton. We could not reduce any part of these charges, neither the incidental charges. Take Christchurch at £1 6s. for face-coal; we cannot work lower than that. I do not see how we can hope to reduce the actual cost of coal. Here are some further particulars: The Westport Coal Company sell and ship at Wellington to the dealers, and, after paying all expenses to their yards, the retailers have an actual margin of about 8s. or 9s. per ton, out of which they have to pay their own expenses of yard and delivery and living and bad debts. It has to cover a great deal when you take their expenses into account, and does not leave much margin. There is no room for reduction. The only debatable point is the railrage, which might be reduced a few pence, and the freight question.

298. Do you consider the number of wagons on the Greymouth-Ngaihere line are sufficient? You mentioned that a particular steamer was delayed through not being able to load as expeditiously as possible?—Yes; and the miners had to be put off work. If the trucks were available, the miners could have done another day's work, and the steamer could have gone another trip. Unless we have more trucks, we cannot extend our operations.

299. If the Greymouth bar is unworkable, and the mine has to stop because the trucks are all full, it could go on working if there were plenty of trucks. The steamer could then load continuously.

300. *Mr. Morrison.*] When the Greymouth bar is closed, and the vessel cannot get across, if the Government could supply sufficient wagons to allow you to use them for storage purposes till the bar was clear, it would expedite your business?—Yes; and help the public. I am not complaining about that. The Blackball Mine is on the Midland railway, and the difficulty is that the railway authorities have had an agreement with the Midland Company at a certain rate, and they had also either an absolute agreement or a tacit arrangement to supply a given number of trucks to the Brunner and Port Elizabeth Company, and they have the first pull on these trucks before they come to us. The railway has given us eighty out of the two hundred trucks now on that section.

301. As one who has had some practical knowledge of the difficulties of mine-proprietors, is it not a fact that you could scarcely get a coal-proprietor in the colony who does not call out on account of the insufficiency of trucks at times?—Yes.

302. For instance, if a cold snap struck any part of the country, and set up a sudden demand for more coal, the Government could not be expected to meet the demand?—I contend that on a rate of 2s. 6d. a ton for sixteen miles the Government could afford to find more rolling-stock, or they could, if it were wanted, make a special charge for rolling-stock.

303. Are you aware of the charges for haulage in other parts of the colony?—If that line was worked as a Government railway-line it would mean 1s. 10d. as against 2s. 6d.

304. Are you aware that at Dunedin there is a large district known as the Green Island district. There is a Government line to it, and yet the Government charge them 1s. 9d. a ton for a distance of not more than six miles or so?—In Christchurch we have a line of ten miles, on which 2s. 6d. is charged for haulage and 6d. is charged for loading the truck. So there are plenty of anomalies.

305. It amounts to this: that, in your opinion, the haulage-rates on railways, for coal, require revision?—If we have to compete with Newcastle the only help the Government can give us is in increasing the number of trucks and reducing the haulage-rates.

306. That would enable you to compete with Newcastle?—That is, we could do 10 per cent. more work with our consumers.

307. And enable you to sell the coal to your consumers at a cheaper rate?—What we want is a margin for our shareholders first.