

JOHN FOSTER examined. (No. 7.)

20. *The Chairman.*] What position do you occupy?—I am president of the Denniston Miners' Union, and check-weighman for the miners on Denniston Hill.

21. You have heard the evidence given so far on this clause 2 by witnesses for the other side?—Yes.

22. Do you wish to make a statement with regard to it?—Yes. I do not know that I can add much more to the evidence I previously gave before this Committee; but evidence has been placed before you now that I would like to show in a different light. It was stated by a witness yesterday that the miners and the company had agreed to fifty minutes as the time that would be required for travelling in and out of the mine. As a matter of fact the miners agreed to forty minutes. The company took the fifty minutes before the Arbitration Court simply to make up the £22,000 referred to. I am quite confident that forty minutes would be ample. Secondly, it was stated here yesterday that there were some 700-odd people working on wages at Denniston Hill and Granity. I say that is not correct. On Denniston there are 274 miners that I am weighing coal for now. Outside of them all the trucking in the mine is let by contract wherever it is possible to do so. In the Ironbridge section, with the exception of two truckers on day-wages, the trucking is done by contract, if my memory serves me right. I could not swear to what I am going to say now, but I honestly believe that on Denniston Hill 125 would cover all the day-labour out of the five hundred employed. Granity, I believe, has some sixty or seventy pair working by results; but they let the trucking, I understand, by contract the same as on Denniston Hill. Then, coming to the brake-head, the tipping is all done by piecework in general. The running of the coal down the incline is done by piecework too. There are times when this work is not done by piecework, but that is seldom. There is a change on Denniston Hill, and the tipping is done by day-labour; but I know the employers and the men are in negotiations to take that work on by piecework. I do not think this clause will affect the Westport Coal Company so far as Denniston Hill is concerned. They are getting their coal hewn cheaper there than at any other mine that I know of in the district. The difference in price between the Denniston Hill Mine and the State Coal-mine at Point Elizabeth, where they are working an inferior coal, is something like 2d. a ton, if the two agreements are worked out. Another statement made yesterday was that the officials of the unions of this colony were urging this matter on and bringing it before Parliament. I totally deny that. It was brought before the House on a petition signed throughout New Zealand by all the miners. That petition should be in this House now. So far as the Otago miners are concerned, it has been stated this morning—and it surprised me very much—that they had withdrawn their application from the Arbitration Court for fear of getting a reduction in their wages. I do not think that is correct. I do not think the miners in Otago would enter into any such arrangement as that without letting the executive of the Miners' Council on the West Coast know what was being done. Neither I, as president, nor Mr. Betts has had any communication from those people, and therefore I do not think they have done anything of the sort. With regard to the haulage-time on Denniston Hill, the eighty score a day is done in six hours and a half. The average time the hauling-rope is going is six hours and a half. If the £22,000 alleged as the loss to the Westport Company is based on the full half-hour's running of that rope, then the estimate is wrong, as the time the rope runs is only twenty minutes per half-hour through the day, and they may base it on that; but I am convinced as a practical miner that as much coal could be produced in the shorter time as in the longer time. If we take the figures for the north of England, in the Durham mines they work six hours and a half a day, and we find that the output per man is equal to that of any other part of England, where they work eight and ten hours. Before the Act came into force we worked eight hours and a half in the mine, but we now work in the mine only eight hours. Before the law was altered we were paid 2s. 10d. a ton, but now we have been reduced to 2s. 4d. At the present time on Denniston Hill the output must be greater per man than it was before, because our wages-sheet shows as good a standing wage now as it did when we got 2s. 10d., which proves that we must be producing more coal in fewer hours. We contend further that immediately a man puts his head underground he is under the supervision of the Westport Coal Company or any other employer who owns a mine. That is the law of the coal-mines Act, and a man is practically working from the moment he puts his head into the mine until he comes out. We contend also that it is only a just and right thing that we should have shorter hours for every miner who is working underground. Notwithstanding the 2d. per ton difference at Point Elizabeth, shorter hours are worked, and there are no complaints. I do not think anything should be put into the Bill with regard to a reduction of wages. We are quite willing to go before the Court with our case, and whatever the Court says shall be a fair living-wage we are prepared to accept; but for the House to say wages shall be reduced would be a step in the wrong direction. We look upon the Court as the proper tribunal to adjust these things, or, in other words, the Court should give a fair living-wage and let things adjust themselves. We are not frightened to let the matter go before the Court for an award. In fact, if this Bill becomes law to-morrow, we have filed a reference to the Court, and it will be before the Court before I go home. This Bill will not stop us from going to the Court. There are certain things that we are not paid for and we must go before the Court for these, and the Court will have an opportunity to adjust matters both on behalf of the employers and the men. It seems to me that the employers are actually afraid to face the Court on the facts; but the men are not afraid to face the Court in any shape or form. I do not know that I can say anything else.

JOHN FOSTER recalled.

*Witness:* I distinctly state that the State Coal-mine is paying 2d. per ton more than is being paid at Denniston.

23. *Mr. Dixon.*] For the same height of coal?—From 5 ft. to 4 ft. the State Coal-mine is paying 2s. 4d. a ton, 2s. 6d., and 2s. 8d., whereas you are paying only 2s. 4d. In addition, the State Coal-mine is paying for all its timber and stone scale to all heights, whereas your company is only paying for 6 ft.