

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON: You will remember, a resolution has already been passed that if a ship is surveyed in the United Kingdom (and the owner can please himself whether he surveys or not) it is accepted by the Australian and New Zealand Governments as sufficient, so that if a vessel is properly surveyed that would include the compasses, and therefore that certificate would be available in the colonies. If she is not surveyed, then the colonies would survey the compasses.

MR. BELCHER: That does not get rid of my point. I have a certain objection to the officer of that ship giving any opinion as to the efficiency of the necessary navigating appliances on board that ship, which I contend should be under the control of the Board of Trade.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is under the control of the Board of Trade.

MR. BELCHER: Yes; but it has been stated that the officer of the ship can go to an officer of the Board of Trade and make an assertion to him that the compasses are in good order, but what guarantee is there that they are in good order?

MR. ANDERSON: Practically the officers of the ship are the only people who can say whether the compasses are in good order, because, as I have explained, the errors of the compass only develop as you alter your geographical position. I have known, for instance (and for that reason, I think, I have good cause to distrust so-called professional adjusters), the case of a ship which was adjusted in London; its compass was accurately adjusted for London, but it developed in Australia a deviation of 24 degrees.

MR. MILLS: I think I am right in saying that in New Zealand those masters who are competent are allowed to pass an examination and get an adjuster's license, in which case they can adjust the compasses of their own ship, and, as a matter of fact, they get a fee for it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Substantially, it is the same position. Will you take it in this form: "That the current 'certificate of the Board of Trade as to the efficiency of 'compasses shall have the same effect as local certificates.'" (*The resolution in this form was carried unanimously.*)

MR. BELCHER: I move, "That it be a recommendation from this Conference to the Board of Trade to 'suggest that legislation be introduced whereby all seamen be paid their full wages at every port where the 'crew may desire the wages to be paid.'" This resolution has been framed with the object of altering what is now the present system with regard to the payment of seamen's wages. This is meant as a suggestion to the Board of Trade that the system observed in Great Britain should be altered. Whether it is going to be a contentious point or not, as to whether it is permissible for one of the Colonial delegates to offer a suggestion to the Imperial authorities with regard to their own domestic legislation, is, of course, for you to decide, Mr. President. I do not want to enter upon this subject at any great length, and find, after it has been discussed at some length, that it is one of those subjects which does not come within our purview. At any rate, my object is to alter the system that now exists with regard to the payment of seamen's wages, and to give them the opportunity of demanding their wages periodically wherever they may be, and whenever they may require it. The British system, so far as I know and understand it, is this: that when a crew signs on articles of agreement in Britain, it does not matter how long that agreement may be for—it may be for three years, 18 months, or two years, as the case may be—that seaman has no legal right whatever to demand his wages at any port he is in. If the crew require money, the only method in which they can get it is by making an application to the master of the ship, who has the right of giving—

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall I read our section; it was amended last year?

MR. BELCHER: Oh, indeed!

THE CHAIRMAN: It is a very important amendment: "Where a balance of wages due to a seaman is more than £10, and a seaman expresses to the master of the ship 'his desire that facilities shall be afforded him for remitting all or any part of the balance to a savings bank or to a near relative, the master shall give to the seaman all reasonable facilities for so doing as far as regards so much of the balance as is in excess of £10,

"but shall be under no obligation to give facilities while 'the ship is in port if the sum becomes payable before 'the ship leaves the port.'" That is to prevent desertion. But he can demand all his wages over £10.

MR. BELCHER: That appears to me to be qualified. That money can only be drawn for the purpose of remitting it to someone else.

THE CHAIRMAN: That is so.

MR. BELCHER: To that I entirely disagree. Suppose the man wants it for his own purposes, surely the man who has earned the money, who has money due to him, should have the right of demanding that he shall get a portion, if not all, at any time he may require it. That is my contention in connection with the matter. I know complaints have been made to me by men on British ships in New Zealand that they found it impossible to get money from the master of the ship. They have gone to him repeatedly and asked for money to purchase necessities, or for the purpose of going on shore and enjoying themselves, and they have been denied. I suppose a sailor has a right to enjoy himself occasionally.

THE CHAIRMAN: I hope you will not misinterpret my smile.

MR. BELCHER: I do not suppose anyone will deny that a sailor has the right to enjoy himself as well as anybody else. That is by the way. I hold that it is an axiom of equity that a person who earns money is entitled to receive that when he requires it. I say the spirit of equity is altogether absent in the agreements which are now entered into in ships which sign their articles out of Great Britain. I suppose the members of the Conference have noted the remarks made in the Report of the Royal Commission appointed by the Commonwealth in connection with this matter. They have expressed so tersely, and in such splendid language, their views that I will read this portion of their report, which practically embodies all the views which I have in connection with the matter, and expresses them a great deal better than I could pretend to do. This is what the Commission say in their report: "Although the rate of wages paid to seamen on 'foreign-going ships of the mercantile marine of the Commonwealth is somewhat higher than that paid on 'vessels of most other countries, it is still considerably 'less in general than that paid to workers ashore. We 'are, however, not so much concerned with the rate of 'wage as with the manner in which payment is made. 'By practice, as well as by law, the seaman is not entitled 'to demand his wage until the completion of the voyage, 'or of the period for which he has engaged. This places 'him in a position of dependence, and has a most demoralising effect upon his fortunes and character. No 'matter what length of time he has been on the ship, nor 'what he may require in the way of clothes or other necessities, he cannot legally demand one penny. Other 'workers receive their wages when earned; the seaman, 'who works harder than most men, is not even entitled 'to payment at reasonable intervals. Where ill-fed, 'badly-housed, and sometimes even ill-treated, and, to 'crown all, unable to obtain a penny of his wages, it is 'hardly a matter for surprise if the sailor on such ships 'succumbs to the deteriorating influences of his environment. The effect, too, of this practice upon the masters 'and owners is in some cases not less deplorable than 'upon the seamen. Evidence was given before the Commission, in Newcastle, that one master of a vessel 'trading to that port made a boast that he had not paid 'a man for three years. The incentive to unscrupulous 'masters and employers to connive at desertion, or even 'to induce seamen to desert is, under such circumstances, 'considerable. It is not contended that the practice is 'general, but that it is not unusual the volume of testimony given before your Commission at Newcastle clearly 'shows. As this matter is dealt with more fully under 'the heading of 'Crimping,' it is not necessary to enter 'into further particulars here. But it is thought imperative that these conditions should be altered at the 'earliest possible moment. It is, therefore, recommended 'that in the foreign-going trade seamen shall be entitled 'to receive, at the expiry of one month from the time of 'shipment, and thereafter at intervals of a month, at any 'port where the ship calls for trading purposes, two-thirds of the wages earned by them." Those are the words of the recommendation of the Royal Commission which sat in Australia, and which took voluminous evidence as to the deteriorating effects of the withholding of the wages upon the seamen. The seamen, to my mind, at any rate in what might be termed deep-water ships, appear to be the victims of a good many people. It is a well-