

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE.

known fact in a great many ships that where the seamen require money urgently for their own purposes they cannot get it. Suppose a man on board a ship left London imperfectly clothed, or with a short supply of clothes, and on getting to another port desired to replenish his wardrobe, the master of the ship point-blank refuses to give him any money, for the reason that he thinks that he may desert. What the master does do in many instances, if he has not what is known as a slop-chest on board the ship, is to give the man an order on some clothing manufacturer to go and get these goods; and we have this for a positive fact, that large commissions pass between the person who supplies the goods and the master of the ship. It is obvious that the seaman must necessarily be prejudiced to the extent of the commission that is given; in other words, he is not getting full value for his money. The general principle is this: the seaman is a worker in the same sense as any other worker, and when he has earned money he should have the right under the law to demand either the whole or a part of it. I will not go so far as to say that he should get the whole of it. I would not mind if there was a little restriction in the direction of a small proportion of his wages being held in hand by the shipowner. But there is no getting away from the fact that the withholding of the payment to seamen has been the means of enriching somebody very considerably right up till now. Supposing a man deserts, under the present circumstances he leaves nearly the whole of his wages behind him. I will go further than that, and say that if a man does desert and he has got a certain portion of his wages, he has only got what is justly due to him; and it is the shipowner's duty, if he can manage it, if he wants to punish that man for desertion, to do so, and he has a very elastic Shipping Act which he can put into operation; he has all the local forces at his command in the shape of law, police, &c., &c., to find the man and punish him. I think the argument which probably will be used, and which I know has been used, that this would be an inducement to desert is not altogether sound. As a matter of fact, the commission in its report refers to that aspect of the question, and this is the way in which they put it: "It appears that the practice in the Australian trade is to pay wages to seamen monthly, and the evidence given shows that desertions are most unusual, and that it is no uncommon thing for men to remain in the service of the same employers for years together. With prospects of permanent employment better men are attracted, thriftier habits are induced, domestic ties encouraged, and, generally speaking, the seaman compares favourably with the man on shore. In Australian-trade and limited-coasting ships, where the time agreement prevails, the alteration in the law will effect no change in the custom." It is shown that both in New Zealand and Australia, where the wages are paid monthly, desertions are practically unknown. It, therefore, cannot be urged, I think, that making periodical payments to the seaman will be conducive to desertions taking place. At any rate, I say, as a practical seaman myself, who has been subjected to the disabilities under which they labour in connection with this matter, that the present system is altogether wrong and untenable, and that the seaman should be treated exactly the same in this respect as any other person, that is that he should get his wages when they are earned. I commend the resolution to the Conference, with the hope that the Board of Trade officials will very carefully and favourably consider the desirability of going even further than they have done in their amending Act of last year, which I was not aware of until it was brought under my notice to-day by Mr. Havelock Wilson. I beg to move the resolution.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON: I hope my friend Mr. Belcher will not press this resolution. I do not like to be in disagreement with him in any respect whatever, but I would like to say to him that last year in the House of Commons, as you know, Mr. President, we fully discussed the whole of this question—

THE CHAIRMAN: And at private conferences.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON: And at private conferences between ourselves and the shipowners, and we came to the conclusion that if the seamen had the right to claim all money due to them over £10 that gave them the privilege of having that money remitted on to the United Kingdom, and if a seaman sent it to a friend, and wanted the money, he could always get that friend to transmit it to the next port, so that he would not be without that money if he wanted it. I quite agree with what Mr.

Belcher said as to what did exist, and probably does exist at the present time; that seamen who have been two years on a ship and wanted money for the purpose of buying clothes could not have it, but the captain would say, "I will send you to a tailor; you can go to a certain tailor and have what clothes you want," and as a result the captain got 25 per cent. from the tailor at the expense of the sailors and firemen. That is the reason that we put this clause in the Act to enable the men to have the means of getting money. But I might also call Mr. Belcher's attention to the fact in connection with the new law that comes in force in June next that a seaman now in England has the right to claim an allotment note. He did not have that right before, but now he has it. When he signs on, all he has to say to the superintendent is, "I want an allotment note for my family," and it must be given to him. Before, it was an option, because very often the owners stipulated that they would give an advance note but no allotment. If that man went on a long voyage his family was left without any means of subsistence whatever. But now the new law which is coming into force in June alters that, so that he can have his family provided for. Then under Section 63, whenever there is over £10 due to him, he can have the balance remitted. If he has a friend in England, whether it is a relative or anybody else, he can have the money sent on to him; or if he has a bank, he can have the money sent on there. Should he require any money during the voyage, I do not see that it would be an impossibility for that man to send to a friend and say, "I am bound to a certain port; I want a sum of money; send me on 'so much—£10,' or whatever it was he required. So that although the resolution moved by Mr. Belcher is a very proper one, I think until the new law has come into operation we might suspend judgment on that. Let us see what the new law is going to do for us. It is quite true, as Mr. Belcher has said, that it is very hard lines on a seaman, who may have a large sum of money due to him, who cannot get any part of it when he arrives at a port, and wants it, not for the purpose of going ashore to enjoy himself, but even to provide himself with the necessary outfit—it is very hard lines if he cannot have it, but I think the new Section will practically cover that point, and do what we have been trying to do for many years. Then, on the other hand, I do not think it would be good policy on long voyage ships for a man to be drawing the whole of his money when he wanted it. My experience of dealing with seamen tells me that many of the chaps would end up at the end of the voyage a jolly sight worse off than when they started. I think it is policy to be a little bit on the safe side, and seeing that Section 63 provides for what we require, I think, Mr. Belcher, it would be well if you could see your way clear to allow this new Act to come into operation, and see what it will do for us. I will promise you this, that if it does not work well I will not forget to ask the Imperial Parliament to do a little more.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: Do I understand that at the present time there is no money payment at all except under very extreme conditions?

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON: I refer you to Section 63.

MR. BELCHER: That is the position at present until that law comes into force.

THE CHAIRMAN: Under the present law he is entitled first of all to make an arrangement before he leaves port that 50 per cent. of his wages shall be paid regularly—I think once a month.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON: To his relatives?

THE CHAIRMAN: To anybody he names.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: But not to himself?

THE CHAIRMAN: Not to himself, no, but to a savings bank. Then with regard to Section 63, any balance over £10 he is entitled, on arriving at a port, to demand being remitted to England.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: What seems to me extraordinary in this regard is why sailors should be treated differently to other men. In every other contract that I know of there is always a provision that a certain percentage either of the wages, or for a certain amount of the work done, generally 75 per cent., is paid to the person. You do not treat the sailors in the same way.