

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

FRIDAY, 9TH SEPTEMBER, 1910

(No. 1.)

Mr G W Russell, M.P Mr Chairman and gentlemen,—I have been requested by the executive of the Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Association to act on their behalf, and I have to thank the Committee for placing first the petition with my name on the top for the purpose of giving me an opportunity of opening the case. I do not propose to make a lengthy address on this occasion, because the matter was very fully gone into last year, and consequently it is not necessary that I should deal with the matter at length. There are, however, one or two points that I would like to emphasize, and they are as follows: The petitions that have been sent in to the House this year have a total number of signatures of men belonging to the Engine-drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Association of, I think, 1,089. That is the actual number of men belonging to this society who have asked Parliament to amend the law so as to give them recognition. As I understand, the total possible membership of the society is somewhere about 1,400: it will thus be seen that an enormous majority of the members have asked for this recognition. Now the position is that, extending over a number of years, there has been dissatisfaction on the part of the locomotive-men with the treatment that they received from the Amalgamated Society. I am not going to attempt to trace the causes of that, but I will say that the men considered that, on account of the magnitude, the diversity, and the lack of cohesion represented by the Amalgamated Society, there was little or no chance of their interests being fully considered, and proof of that was given last year before this Committee by the delegates from the engine-drivers' society, who pointed out that, while other branches of the service had received material increases in their wages and salaries, their department of the service had had virtually no advantage, notwithstanding the fact that the cost of living had enormously increased during recent years, and the reason for this was stated as arising out of the fact that in a large service like the Railways an enormous proportion of the men are necessarily receiving lower rates of wages than the engine-drivers. It is natural that a society which includes an enormous number of service-men such as shunters, porters, and other classes who receive small salaries would be compelled almost of necessity to look after the interests of the men who are receiving low rates of wages rather than to make the primary cause of their operations an increase in the wages of the locomotive-men, who, on account of the technical nature of their work and on account of the high qualifications they have to possess, necessarily receive a larger rate of pay than the other branches. This feeling grew until at last the men in New Zealand realized that if they were to get their grievances redressed, and, above all, if they were to get them clearly and distinctly brought before the management and the Minister, there was only one thing to do, and that was to establish a union of their own, as is done in almost every country in the world. It is not necessary for me to produce proof, but I can say that Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Associations exist and are officially recognized in England, Scotland, Ireland, America, Argentina, Sweden, Africa, France, Germany, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania. I am here this morning to assert, on behalf of the union which I represent, that similar unions exist in those countries, and are working side by side with the other societies similar to that which in New Zealand is called the Amalgamated Society. That therefore negatives any such idea as that there must of necessity be hostility between the two associations if the second one were recognized. Now, sir, I shall call evidence during the inquiry to show that, in the opinion of men who are best qualified to judge—that is, the men themselves—the Amalgamated Society has not in the past satisfactorily and efficiently represented the engine-drivers, firemen, and cleaners to their satisfaction. I shall call evidence to prove that due prominence has not been given to the requests of the engine-drivers, firemen, and cleaners as a body. I shall call evidence that will prove that this is a legally constituted union recognized by the law, and that the only difficulty that stands in the way of the official recognition by the Department is the fact that there is a law upon our statute-book which is not in operation. Under clause 121 of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act it is provided that the Minister may make an industrial agreement with the Amalgamated Society and the fact that the Amalgamated Society is mentioned there is the sole bar to the official recognition by the Department of the Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Union. You have heard the report read from the General Manager this morning, in which he states to this Committee that the Department sees no objection to the official recognition of the Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Union. I shall prove, by asking the General Manager, that there is no industrial agreement between the Amalgamated Society and the Government; I shall prove that there never has been an application on either side for an industrial agreement, and that therefore this law which stands in the way of official recognition of the Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Union is nothing but a shadow—nothing but a figment—a thing that is being used now against its original intention, and being used for the purpose of obstructing the aspirations of a number of men who seek for their own protection and benefit to improve their position. Now, referring to the objects of the Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen, and Cleaners' Union, they naturally place in the forefront of their objects to act for the mutual assistance and protection of the members. The second clause of their objects, as stated in the sheet I have before me, and which I propose to hand in, is to prevent strikes in the Railway service. This is an association having a no-strike clause in its conditions, and I