A COMMENT BY JAMES STEPHENSON OF WINLATON

Mr. Stephenson, after the first World War, was a member of the Independent Labour Party. Soon he became Chairman of Victoria Garesfield Miners. He was Chairman for four years. Then he moved to Rowlands Gill where he was elected checkweighman and was Secretary of the Rowlands Gill Miners' Lodge for ten years and was Secretary during the 1926 strike. Later he moved to Blaydon where he was Secretary of the Lodge of the Blaydon Burn Colliery and he was also checkweighman. He was also a member of the Gateshead Board of Guardians for their last five years and has been a Blaydon Councillor for 36 years. He has also taken part in a BBC broadcast on the 1926 General Strike.

Q. Was Rowlands Gill colliery a large one?

A. Rowlands Gill was only one of the smallest of the collieries in Durham county but it had its own importance, I think, in the annals of the Durham Miners' Association. It was always one of the more progressive collieries. They always looked to Rowlands Gill for a lead on a lot of problems as they came up.

Q. Do you mean technical problems or labour problems?

A. Labour problems and problems connected with the industry.

Q. Where did the men live?

A. The men lived in colliery houses in Lily Terrace and Carl Terrace and they also had some colliery houses at what is locally known as "The Bottoms" at Rowlands Gill which has now been cleared for a camping site. They also had some colliery houses at the village of Highfield. The rest, I should think, were scattered in private houses and in a few council houses that there were in the early days.

Q. Do you remember any of the stoppages before 1926?

A. Well, I remember them all, the minimum wage strike and several others. Before the first war I remember I was a putter at the Chopwell Colliery and they had a most unusual stoppage there. It was a restriction of output, where the men had agreed to fill one tub per day and I remember going to work and nothing coming out except one tub for each man. That went on, I think, for over a week and finally the Lodge found a solution to it.

Q. Where did you hold your meetings at Rowlands Gill?

A. When I first went there the Rowlands Gill Lodge had their meetings in the small Co-operative Hall. I do not think it is there now. Afterwards, after 1926, they built a hall of their own and had meetings there. In 1926 they were held in this small Co-operative Hall.

Q. Were the meetings large?

A. From the point of view of the number employed there I would say the meetings were very well attended. There was quite a lot of interest taken in the problems as they arose.

Q. That would be especially the case in 1926?

A. Yes. Every time there was a meeting in 1926 one could say that 75 per cent of the men attended. Obviously they had nothing else to do. Meetings during the stoppage were held during the day when there was plenty of time.

Q. Did you ever go and hear A. J. Cook?

A. Yes, I attended that historic meeting which Cook addressed at Burnhope while the Lodges marched in with bands and banners and was greatly impressed by Cook. As a matter of fact he and I, over the years, built up quite a personal relationship. I did have quite a number of letters from A. J. Cook and I knew him rather well personally. He was a man of great character. I should say also a man of great courage because you have to remember that the whole of the Press and the organs of publicity were all mobilised against Cook and he was built up as some terrible ogre while actually, of course, he was the kindest and most gentle of men that anyone could meet and to have described Cook as he was described by some of the Conservative people was absolutely ridiculous.

Q. Can you remember any incidents connected with your relationship with Cook?

A. I remember being at Highfield and somebody saying to him that an old lady who couldn't get out of the house had been asking after him and he said "Where does she live?" and off he went. We called on her and had a long chat. She was delighted, of course, that he went out of his way to meet her.

Q. I believe you knew Mr. Maxton as well?

A. Yes. Aye, I spoke with Maxton in the Palace Theatre in Newcastle and I had quite a few letters from Maxton at one time. I am sorry I did not keep them now. I also spoke with Cook in the Theatre Royal at Stanley.

Q. Can you remember any incidents in your relationship with Mr. Maxton?

A. I remember the organiser of the meeting at the Palace Theatre said to him "Look, Jimmie, you must be feeling tired, I have booked you a sleeper so that when we go back to London you will be able to get some rest." Maxton said "and how much does that cost?" I think the cost of a sleeper at that time was about 12s. Od. He said "put the 12s. Od. in the funds, I'll sleep propped up in my seat."

Q. Were there many skirmishes in the area during the strike?

A. Well, minor skirmishes. One or two who had drifted back to work were taken there in a wagon with wire netting over the top. The wagons were nicknamed "covered wagons" but the Police came down the streets and made everybody go into the houses until they got these men up to the pit. But I don't think there was anything very much in the way of skirmishes with the public.

Q. Was there any picketing of food vans?

A. Yes, well there was the famous case of Will Lawther who afterwards became a Member of Parliament and President of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, and Harry Bolton who picketed a van at Winlaton Mill and were sent to prison, I think for about three months. The van that was to take some food to a shop in Chopwell belonged to a particular tradesman. It was picketed by the women in the Chopwell village and I think, after the first day, they found they were wasting their time, because nobody went near the shop, and after two or three weeks the firm closed the shop. From that day the firm has never dared to open a business in the village of Chopwell.

Q. Where did the Police come from?

A. The Police we had in the Rowlands Gill and Highfield area were great big fellows from the docks in Hull and I am bound to say, from my dealings with them, that they behaved themselves a good deal better than the Durham Police, because I remember the Durham Police coming through the village of Highfield when I and a group of men were standing at the corner, and they disgraced themselves by putting their fingers up to their noses. I do not know what that was supposed to signify but you would expect policemen to behave themselves differently.

Q. Were there many arrests at the time, besides Henry Bolton?

A. Yes, there were quite a few arrests. I know one case in Highfield where they arrested a man supposed to have made an attack on somebody's car and it was well known in the village that they had got the wrong man. It was the chap's brother who was guilty. But as this other chap's wife was fairly ill, he said "you keep you mouth quiet and I'll go to prison", which he did. He accepted a prison sentence for his brother.

Q. How long was the sentence?

A. I think about a month.

Q. Were there many blacklegs?

A. At Rowlands Gill? Very few. Very few anywhere, I think, in the Blaydon district.

Q. I believe, after the strike, there was a non-political union?

A. Yes, we had a non-political union which started at Rowlands Gill. There was never more than about half a dozen of them and I think the Manager at our place had very little use for them. In fact, the Agent said to me "Look here, Stephenson, I can't trust them." You couldn't. "People who can't play fair and can't be trusted by their own kind are not likely to be very much use to me", and he washed them off as being of no value either to him or to anybody else, and after a month or two they simply faded away.

Q. I believe you were the editor of the news sheet called the "Northern Light" at that time?

A. Yes, this was quite an adventurous piece of my life because we started and published this thing. It was done on typewriters and afterwards run off by duplicators and we published it every day. I should think, during the time of the general strike, it came out from a different place almost every day, because the Police were after us and they almost sat on my doorstep hoping to catch me with it, and we functioned from empty houses and all kinds. Strange to relate, we always knew when the Police were going to raid, and by the time they got there, the birds had flown and gone elsewhere. A chap by the name of Edward Wilson was one of the most harmless men I ever knew. He was given three months for selling "Northern Light" and described by the Police as one of the most dangerous communists in the district.* If Ned was a dangerous communist, then he was a peculiar communist so far as I am concerned, because I don't think he would have said "boo" to a goose.

Q. Did he live at Rowlands Gill?

A. He lived at Rowlands Gill and was a member of the Rowlands Gill Lodge.

Q. Over what area was the paper circulated?

A. It was circulated right up to Chopwell, High Spen, Highfield and Rowlands Gill; probably a few hundreds each day, which we sold, I think, for a penny - sufficient to get us enough paper and duplicating material to turn it out for the next day.

Q. I believe some of the Courts were strongly against the miners at this time?

A. Well, that's putting it mildly. Ellen Wilkinson wrote a book on the general strike. She mentioned the savage sentence that was meted out to Ned Wilson as being a classic example of the panic which struck the people who were in control of justice or what was supposed to be justice. Andy Lawther, who was a brother of Will, was sent to prison and the Chairman of the Gateshead Bench said to him - looking back now it is almost laughable - before he sentenced him to prison, "I'm sorry I cannot send you to Soviet Russia." What Soviet Russia had to do with the miners' strike I fail to know, but it showed of course that he was like a lot of other people who were looking for communists under the bed.

* Sir Alfred Palmer, Chairman of the Gateshead magistrates, said in passing sentence: "The manner in which Chopwell has been governed for some time past is a scandel, and this bench is determined to see that that state of things is put an end to. If you think that the Council of Action can hold us the inhabitants in a state of tyranny you are very much mistaken. Why you and those associated with you don't go to Russia, I don't know. I am sure the Government, and I personally, would subscribe willingly to get rid of the whole lot of you and let you go and live in that country where everything is so blissful and so happy. We don't want you. Nobody wants you. You are just a source of danger to the community and the sooner you make up your minds to either reform or to get away, the better for all concerned." Newcastle Chronicle May 21st 1926. (Quoted by Dr. A. Mason in his thesis "The Miners' Unions of Northumberland and Durham, 1918-1931, with special reference to the General Strike of 1926" - University of Hull 1967.)

Q. What kind of activities were there in the area? Sporting activities - at that time?

A. There were one or two football matches. One of the things which actually sprung up was ladies' football matches. I remember some of the girls playing football. I remember also at Blaydon hearing about a sports day that the Blaydon miners had organised but, generally speaking, they had quite enough to keep them occupied in their meetings and their gardens and other things during the time of the general strike.

Q. Were the communists active? Did they demonstrate at that time?

A. The communists, as such, had a fairly active communist branch in Chopwell, but they were absorbed into the general scheme of things and communists and non-communists worked side by side and I should think you would have been a very clever man to distinguish a communist from an ordinary individual. I have always said, and I say again, there are two ways of making a communist; one is reading Karl Marx and the other is by being kicked around by the employers. Consett Iron Company made far more communists than ever Karl Marx made.

Q. What kind of assistance did the men get during the stoppage?

A. I think the most important assistance came from the Gateshead Board of Guardians to which I was elected as a member way back in 1924. By Law, of course, you couldn't give assistance to the men, but what we did was to give assistance to the women and children, and even then we were told by the Ministry of Health that we were giving too much, and we defied the Ministry of Health and continued to give it. The whole of the Gateshead Board of Guardians, with the exception of the Moderates, which is another name for Conservatives, who voted against the proposal, were all surcharged and I remember about thirty of us were lined up, in two great rows, at the Gateshead Police petty sessions and were all charged with giving excessive relief. We were all surcharged to the tune, I think, of about £250. It was too funny for words, because I stood there, and my total wealth, I think at about that time, was about 15s. 0d. - and they surcharged me £250.

Q. You didn't pay this surcharge?

A. It was eventually paid by the Trade Unions and the Labour Party after we got back to work, but I never paid any of it.

Q. How was the relief paid? To the people?

A. It was given 50 per cent cash and 50 per cent food vouchers. I was, of course, a member of the Board of Guardians and I couldn't receive any relief. They took collections and gave me exactly what they got themselves. I never got any more than what they were given and on that we had to carry on.

Q. I believe people in the area also gave gifts?

A. Well; one incident happened to me. I had a brother-in-law who had a shop - boot repairing - and used to sell boots. I remember going up there and calling in to see him and he looked at my shoes and said "Your shoes are getting a bit thin", and I said "Yes, there are a lot of things getting thin just now". He said "Are those the only shoes you've got?". I said "These are all I have". He went away and brought a pair of shoes back. He said "Try them on; they'll cost you five shillings and you can pay me when you get back to work". After a bit he came with a better pair and said "Try these on. I'll give you the first pair and you can pay me five shillings for that pair, but I'm not letting you go from here with a pair of rubbishy things like the first ones you had". So I came down home and my wife nearly fainted when she saw me arriving with two pairs of new shoes - in the middle of an industrial dispute. She thought I'd gone mad.

Q. Did the Union help at all?

A. The Union had, from time to time. From time to time there were grants made because it was obvious that the miners funds were soon depleted; there was spasmodic payment of relief from the Union funds. There was also, I think, in the Chopwell area, a certain amount of money supposed to have come from Russia. A woman by the name of Mrs. Helen Crawford I remember coming to Chopwell and helping its distribution.

Q. Were there any soup kitchens?

A. The school children were fed by the Durham County Council while the schools were open which, of course, was a tremendous help. It meant that the children had a meal. It wasn't just soup, it was a midday meal which was given to the children in the schools.

Q. And there were soup kitchens as well?

A. I do not remember any soup kitchens in our district other than what was done as school feeding.

Q. Did the doctors give their help free at that time?

A. My mind is a bit vague on what the doctors did but I cannot remember any objections that people weren't being attended by doctors and I can only assume that the doctors carried on and did what was necessary to be done without expecting any pay.

Q. In your area, though, the money wasn't taken off the wage packet was it? There were collectors.

A. As far as I was concerned they collected because I wasn't paid by the Colliery Company. I think it was off the pay packet in this district as well but people like myself had to pay to collectors.

Q. Was there any coal digging organised?

A. Yes, that was quite an achievement. We in the Highfield district, just on the edge of Chopwell wood, had our own private drift going and this was worked on a rota system. It was timbered up and you could get in. Coal was dragged out in old bath tins on the end of ropes and they had a proper organised system and people got so many barrow loads of coal in turn. It was perfectly organised. Wonderful organisation. All done on the edge of Chopwell wood. I believe in another district they even formed a coal drift underneath the floorboards of a colliery house.

Q. The owners, obviously, did not know about this?

A. Oh no.

Q. What were conditions like at home in those days?

A. Well I never could remember being hungry, because we never lived extravagantly in any case, but we were never without a meal of some kind. I kept a fairly good garden, still do, we always had potatoes and cabbage, and if the meat was a little short, well, we managed somehow.

Q. What about savings though?

A. Savings were, naturally, gone. My wife and I hadn't been married very long, we hadn't many savings to start with. The few pounds we had of course quickly went down the drain.

Q. Were there many debts in the area? For example to the Council?

A. Well, yes. We were buying our own house, with a mortgage on it; a house in a terrace, and when it was all over I only had a fairly big list of debts that were owing to Blaydon Council. I remember coming in one afternoon and my wife saying "Here's another bill, what are we going to do about this?" and I said "Well, have you read the "Daily Herald" this morning?" Hannan Swaffer said (it was Derby Day) a horse was going to win the Derby which had an English name and was owned by a foreign gentleman. I said "That is obviously Windsor Lad, owned by the Aga Khan". So she said "Well, here's 2s. 6d., put it on". I had 4s. 6d., so we put that on, and it won 12½ to one. That is the first time ever I bet on horses and I never bet since, because I always believed the law of averages was against it ever happening again.

Q. I believe Will Driver in Chopwell helped the men a lot at that time?

A. Yes. Will Driver loaned the Chopwell miners a lot when they were out (they were out of course before the general strike started). He let them have leather on credit, nails, hammers, lasts and everything so that they could repair their own boots. Will told me (he was a brother-in-law of mine) that he had actually advanced the Chopwell miners several hundred pounds. He was in business as a shoe repairer and he actually let them have this leather and materials, and in twelve months Chopwell miners had paid him back, had paid back every single penny he had advanced to them. They loyally paid back every single penny.

Q. Was there any help from the voluntary societies and the Church at that time?

A. Never heard of any. Churches, I think, were too middle class to be worried about the miners.

Q. Even the Methodist churches?

A. I never heard of them doing anything.

Q. When the men ceased the strike and they all went back to work, was there a feeling of bitterness?

A. Well, if there was, it was well kept down. I didn't find any bitterness. There was disappointment but they were determined that there would be another day. This was only the first round of the battle that would be continued later on. They said "We are not defeated, this is only the first round of the battle, and the people who will win will be those who win the last battle". I think that finally, when the mines were nationalised, they could say they had won the battle.

(This tape recording was made by John Adamson, of Consett Technical College.)

Publications of Interest to Members

About to be published:

Dr. A. Mason "The General Strike in the North East" 40s. (University of Hull)

Next year:

Prof. E. Allen, J. F. Clarke, Dr. N. McCord, D. J. Rowe "The Engineers Strike of 1871" (Frank Graham) 50s.

Already published:

D. Bythell "The Handloom Weavers" 75s. (Oxford University Press)