

## **\* Labour Member visits Coalmines**

### ***Inspects Working Conditions and Miners' Home***

The Hon'ble Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Member for Labour, Government of India, arrived at Dhanbad on Thursday, December 9 to study working conditions in the coalfields. Among those present to receive him were a number of local officials, including Mr. S. N. Mazumdar, Labour Commissioner, Bihar, and Mr. W. Kirby, Chief Inspector of Mines, and representatives of various Mining Associations and colliery owners. Mr. H. C. Prior, Secretary, Labour Department, and Mr. R. S. Nimbkar, Labour Welfare Adviser to the Government of India arrived earlier in the day.

Immediately after arrival the Labour Member, accompanied by the Chief Inspector of Mines, colliery owners, Mr. Prior and Mr. Nimbkar, drove to Bhulanbararee Colliery. The representatives of workers, Mr. Karnik, representing the Indian Federation of Labour, and Miss Shanta Bhall Rao, representing 'the All-India Trade Union Congress, also accompanied the party to study working conditions in the coalfields. The programme included inspection of both surface and underground conditions of work.

### **400 Feet Underground**

Wearing "Safety hats" very much resembling well-known Army tin hats in shape, the Labour Member and party went 400 feet underground in two batches where they saw workers cutting coal. There were some women workers who had been recently employed in the colliery as a result of the removal of prohibition on employment of women in mines. The Labour Member, Mr. Nimbkar and others in the party

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\*Indian Information, January 1, 1944, pp. 39-40.

asked the workers a number of questions concerning their wages and earnings.

At another stage during the inspection of Bhulanbararee Colliery, the party saw stowing operations in progress. During the course of the surface inspection, Dr. Ambedkar had friendly chats with workers regarding their wages and earnings.

The Labour Member then proceeded to the workers' quarters in the vicinity of the colliery. *Ham ander a sakte hain*—with these polite words in Hindustani the Labour Member took permission of the occupant to enter his house, which was readily given. He inspected the furniture and other contents of the house and looked round to see the ventilation arrangements.

The party were then taken to a well-equipped and cleanly-kept hospital, maintained by owners of this colliery, where the Labour Member chatted with a few indoor patients. He was also taken round a special ward for women workers.

### **At Workers' Colony**

The party then drove to the Digwadih Colliery where they saw modern plant and equipment used for the production of coal. Here the Labour Member spent about an hour in the workers' colony and saw various types of houses built by the proprietors for their workers. He took great interest in the methods and channels of recruitment for colliery labour. The programme for the day included inspection of the Tisra Colliery. The inspection began with the examination of rates of wages paid by employers of the colliery to workers. It was late in the evening when the party came out to make surface inspection of the colliery. The workers were leisurely returning to their homes, carrying spades, pick-axes and kerosene safety lamps. The Labour Member thus had an opportunity of seeing workers and their womenfolk preparing their evening meals in their homes. He was very keen on acquainting himself with the quantity and nature of food available to and consumed by workers. At the *Tisra* Colliery he also saw a few quarries where men and women were doing surface work.

### **Visit To Raniganj Coalfields**

**Dr. B. R. Ambedkar** and party devoted Friday to studying

working conditions and methods of coal production in some Raniganj coalfields.

The inspection began with an examination of the arrangements being made by proprietors of the Sivapur Colliery for the welfare and medical care of their miners. The party were taken round a quadrangular single-storied white hospital building containing modern X-ray equipment and other surgical apparatus. It was learnt that the hospital would start working shortly.

Later in the day, the Labour Member was taken to a Leper Welfare Centre where leprosy in its earlier stages can effectively be treated. Dr. Ambedkar also visited a small compact building accommodating a baby welfare centre where he saw frailbodied children of miners, who were being looked after by ayahs. The Labour Member expressed appreciation of these welfare efforts but asked why the children were frail and rickety. He was told that it was due to a deficiency of nutritive food.

### **School For Miners' Children**

Winding their way along the road to Sitapur Colliery, the party visited a primary school where workers' children garlanded Dr. Ambedkar. The Labour Member chatted with a seven year-old boy—a miner's son—who answered questions regarding the earnings of his family *in halting but understandable English*.

Earlier in the day the party inspected the Sodhpur Stowing Plant—a huge mechanical structure drawing 200 tons of sand per hour from the Damodar basin in the vicinity and conveyed to the mines by automatic ropeways.

The party also inspected underground conditions of work in Sitapur colliery. They descended about 1,000 feet and saw coal being raised by up-to-date coal-cutting machinery.

On the way back to Dhanbad the Labour Member visited the “dhowras” (one-room tenements) in the Workers' colony at the Begunia collieries. The rooms were dark and, in one case, a calf, lazily chewing dry grass, was seen in the small verandah-sharing with the inmates their *scanty* accommodation. Dr. Ambedkar chatted with the inmates. It was learnt that workers get coal free of charge in sufficient

quantities for domestic use. He made further enquiries regarding food, clothing and health of the workers.

### **Labour Problems Discussed At Dhanbad**

The reason for the present shortage of coal and the measures to overcome it were discussed on Saturday at Dhanbad at a conference attended by representatives of the Central Government, the Governments of Bengal and Bihar, the three Mining Associations and spokesmen of Labour. The Hon'ble Dr. Ambedkar Labour Member, presided.

In a short opening speech the Chairman compared the conference with the Tripartite Labour Conferences at which questions relating to industrial labour are discussed. He emphasised the importance of producing more coal both for India's industries and war effort and hoped that the representatives of employers and employees would be able to give their best advice on the matter.

The reasons for the fall in labour were given as the exceptionally good harvest, which required more labour than usual owing to the "Grow More Food Campaign" and the competition of military work. Measures to meet the situation were considered, and employers' representatives asked for more petrol and tyres to help in bringing labour from neighbouring villages to the collieries.

A rationing scheme, proposed by the Central Government some time ago, and aiming at providing miners (both men and women) with an adequate ration, was the next item on the agenda. During the discussion, the possibility of the introduction by the Bihar Government of a rationing scheme in the area was mentioned and it was decided that the scheme introduced for the mines would have to be reconsidered if this occurred.

The scheme for miners' supplies includes provision for food for mine-workers' dependants. While fixing five days as the minimum number of days that must be worked to ensure the full week's ration, the scheme also provides for adequate supplies for those who work fewer days. It was agreed that rice should be sold initially to workers at six seers per rupee, and that necessary quantities of dal should also be sold at the same price.

The Conference also considered a scheme proposed by the Central Government for the supply of other commodities like salt, mustard oil, standard cloth and other consumer goods to workers—the intention is that bulk supplies should be placed at the disposal of Mining Associations for distribution to collieries. Among other measures put forward by Government for consideration as measures to promote the welfare of colliery labour, was a scheme for a Welfare Cess to be imposed forthwith to create a fund from which expenditure on welfare would be incurred and a proposal to appoint Labour Officers in all collieries with a production of over 100,000 tons.

### **Increase In Wages**

The Conference agenda also included a number of items relating to wages of colliery workers, and Mining Associations seemed ready to make a further increase in the wages prevailing in 1939, bringing the temporary war increase to a total of 50 per cent above pre-war wages. They were, however, apprehensive that this increase would be wasted unless adequate stocks of consumer goods were available in the coalfields and the necessity of ensuring this was recognised.

Other items discussed included the possibility of applying the Payment of Wages Act to coalmines and certain difficulties of its application to the coal industry were noted. Requests from the industry in regard to assistance in matters of Excess Profits Tax and provision of machinery were also considered.

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