

The National Vehicular Traffic Workers' Union
(Late Amalgamated Omnibus and Tram Workers' Union)

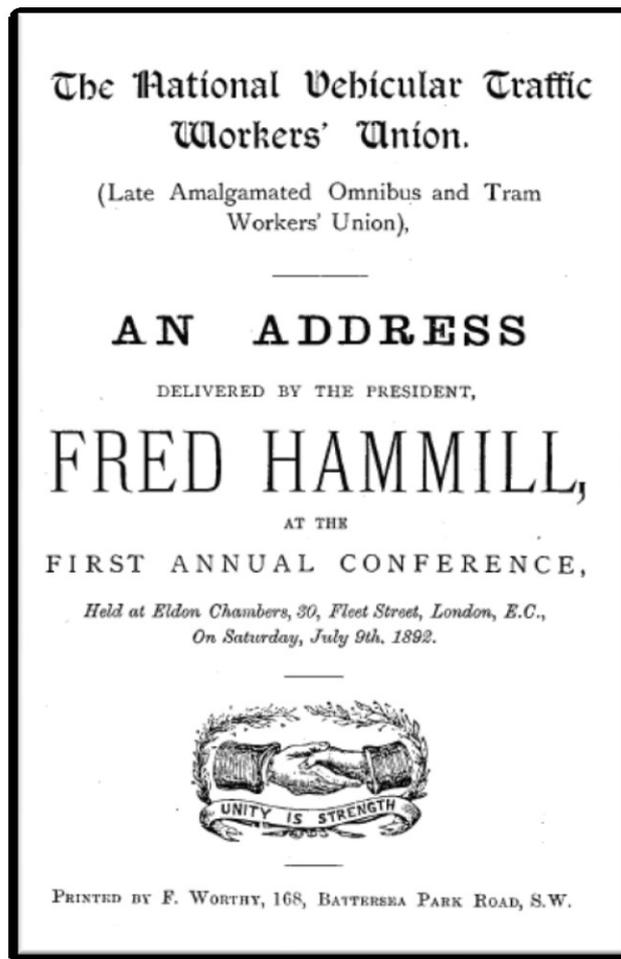
AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE PRESIDENT,
FRED HAMMILL,

AT THE
FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Held at Eldon Chambers, 30, Fleet Street, London, E.C.,

On Saturday, July 9th, 1892.

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FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE of the AMALGAMATED OMNIBUS &
TRAM WORKERS' UNION,

held at 30, Fleet Street, London, E.C., July 9th, 1892.

Presidential Address

BY

FRED HAMMILL

Members of the Amalgamated Omnibus and Tram Workers Union,—It is with feelings of pleasure that I have the honour to preside at your first Annual Conference, and to now address you, who eleven months ago, were scattered and unorganized, but who,—although not as you ought to be as a power of combination—will ere long, I hope, become one of the most powerful organizations in civilized England.

At the close of one of the historical strikes in the year 1891, viz., the great Omnibus Strike, there was a general desire among the men for a permanent organization. After many appeals to the London Trades Council for assistance, the Executive of that body decided to appoint an Organizer. The organizing entailed some difficulty owing to your scattered and precarious occupation rendering it exceedingly difficult to bring you together. It was clearly seen that the task was a formidable one, as the late and long hours worked by you made it impossible for you all to meet in Branches at one time, as workers in other trades and industries do. Your humble servant was elected unanimously by the Executive of the London Trades Council, and having refused to accept the task, the question was then submitted to the whole of the delegates composing the Council, who voted unanimously that I should undertake the responsibility, which I then did.

The Council then generously voted a sum of £10 to pay my wages for one month, after the expiration of which period the duly-elected Executive of your Union insisted on me remaining with you up to the present moment, they electing me as Organizing President of your Union.

The Organization which you now represent, commenced, as you perceive, under exceedingly trying circumstances. Six omnibus men, who had been weeks without employment owing to the part they displayed through the 'Bus Strike, were engaged as Collectors, and they absorbed half my months' wages before we commenced operations at all. Your now General Secretary, Mr. H. Bowbrick, had to pawn his watch and guard to pay a deposit on renting your Offices. Thus commenced your Organization practically in the pawnshop, and under the auspices of the London Trades Council. The position of your Union is sound and solid, and after eleven months' of arduous work and responsibility, dozens of midnight meetings, and the circulation of a hundred thousand have satisfaction by the conscientious conviction that we have done our duty by doing our best.

I cannot pass over this without a word of praise for the constant, assiduous and energetic attention to duty by your General Secretary. New to the work and vicissitudes of organization, he has shown an aptitude and devotion to the cause, combined with honest integrity and truthfulness, which, through his reliability, I have received much valuable assistance.

The cost of collecting contributions in the streets has been heavy, as your Secretary will inform you, but you must consider we had no other course with London 'Busmen, but now we are abolishing all street collections, and forming Branches, and with the amalgamation of Carmen, you will be able to make successful and rapid progress.

You are indebted to the Press of England, and particularly of London, for having espoused your cause as no body of men have been before, which you can verify by reference to your Press Book, and we trust this will continue in the future as in the past.

We have encountered many difficulties owing to the tyrannies and various inflictions imposed on the men by various Omnibus Companies since the Strike; such, of course, follows every Strike. We have fought them and publicly exposed them, and our charges have never been refuted, but altered conditions have accrued, evidence of which will be put before you, particularly with reference to the London Road Car Company, who have adhered to the 12 hours' day, and who have expressed a desire that the men should improve their condition by organizing and associating with us. But above all this, let it be clearly understood that there has been, and is still, a general inclination on the part of some Companies to always wring from workers all they possibly can, and although some 'Busmen have been put on the old system of long hours, I wish to state, and to state emphatically, that had it not been for the knowledge of your existence as a Union and that you mean business, the whole of the 'Busmen of London to-day would have been on the old system of long hours. (Hear, hear.)

The Tram-men on the Woolwich lines have received an advance of 2/- and 1/6 per week per man. The Tram-men on the Deptford lines an advance of 2/- and 3/- per week per man with a reduction of seven hours per week. (Cheers).

The Bradford men have gone forward with a bound, and are in their own house, they having possessed themselves of a large Social Club, capable of accommodating 600 people. In this Club they can meet for common association and generally improve their mental and material condition, much of which is needed. Many of them are working under conditions which would hardly be tolerated by a South African slave. I have pledged myself to alter this, which, with your assistance and the organization of the Bradford men I will attempt to accomplish; and I may inform you they are quietly preparing for this, and ere long we shall issue a memorial to the employers for a standard rate of pay for one horse and two horse teams, abolition of boy labour, abolition of the system of one man with two horses and two carts and a general reduction of hours. Traffic-men in Bradford are now compelled—during their week's work—to leave the town between 5 and 6 p.m. on Sunday evening—and, forsooth, when professed christians are wending their way to church. What irony!—With vans full of warps, which they take from the dyers of Bradford into Colne and Burnley, in

Lancashire. They leave the mills at 5 o'clock and do not return until 12 midnight on Monday, covering 60 or 70 miles. These men are often on the road the whole of this time, and too often fall asleep through the long hours which they are at work, and are being continually fined by the police for being caught asleep on the road. Surely if there be Providence then the christian people of Bradford should intercede and pray that man may be endowed with power to resist the law of nature for 60 hours, or if not, then assist us in making impossible these conditions, which are a disgrace to a Yorkshire town and people. Some of these men are at work 100 hours per week for a pittance of 18/- and £1 per week. I find also in Bradford that the Corporation have been entering into contracts with contractors for supplying horses and carts at a price almost incredible, viz., a horse and cart and man for 5/9 per day. Some of the men who work these horses and carts work 100 hours per week, and are paid 18/- per week by the contractor, and from this 6d. is deducted for what the men call "choppy"—for chopping the hay into chaff. I contend that if the law says a man shall be prosecuted for being asleep, it certainly has a right, and we have a claim, that it should have a voice in making the conditions such that a man could keep awake, and not that he should be at work from 5 o'clock on Sunday night to 12 o'clock on Monday midnight, and then because he happens to be overcome by nature and falls asleep, be fined. Information reaches me that some action has been taken in Bradford by a Labour member of the Municipality in reference to the contracts for carting, and improved prices instituted instead of sweating ones. It is hoped that this will be closely watched by our members, and that improvements in this direction will continue. The Tram Drivers and Conductors of Bradford are working miserably long hours for wages as low as 2d. per hour; we anticipate their joining our Union, and hope the Bradford members will bring them into the fold of combination, by which they can reduce their hours and increase their wages.

Ignorance must be replaced by knowledge, apathy by energy, lukewarmness by enthusiasm, and a solid collective force established nationally, which can only be brought about by the organization, association, education and determination of every individual worker, and which must be accomplished before you and your fellows can secure better conditions of any value.

Your trade or occupation is spread over the highways and byeways of rural, provincial and city life, covering in its vastness the whole area of civilization, and penetrating every trade and industry which makes England what she is to-day, the leading commercial nation of the world. But those who ride successfully on the commercial car of England, or in the omnibus of individual comfort, pleasure and enjoyment, are too often void of care, and oft of thought, for those who produce it, and always forget, that such success in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred is purchased and achieved at the cost of long and slaving hours on the part of you, the real workers. A quarter of a million of men are employed in the vehicular trade of England at wages—or shall I say pittance—as low as 2d. per hour, and many of whom are working a hundred hours per week. Such is our boasted civilization. Such is the lot of you actual wage earners, while the despoiler and profit-monger chuckle in luxury over their wily achievement of success. Knowledge and education have given them the power to exercise their authority and superiority over you, which can only be met, rebutted and reversed by you possessing yourself of the same power by the same means. Every facility is now before you,

and at your command, to be equal with them, by free technical and practical education, which alone can raise you from the degradation, discomfort and indolence, which too long you have silently endured.

It may be needless for me to put figures before you to convince you that in London alone there are as many men engaged in the road traffic as compose one-third of the standing Army of England. 28,908 of these are licensed men, representing 15,336 hackney drivers. 6,145 stage drivers' and 7,427 conductors' licenses were issued during the year 1890, and we may now fairly estimate—considering the 'Bus Strike and the general influx of rural men into the city of London — that the aggregate number of licensed men in London to-day is at least 35,000.

The development of the Omnibus and Tramway Traffic in London may be ascertained by comparing the year 1886 with that of 1890. In the year 1886 there were 1,663 omnibuses and 868 tramway cars and 11,468 licenses issued to drivers and conductors. In the year 1890 there were 2,210 omnibuses and 1,022 tramway cars, and 13,572 licenses issued for drivers and conductors, shewing an increase of licenses issued to drivers and conductors of 2,104. Hence, it is apparent that for the 3,232 omnibus and tramway cars there were 13,572 licenses issued to drivers and conductors, giving more than two drivers and two conductors for each omnibus and tramway car, and accurately is 419 men to each omnibus and tramway car.

This is proof sufficient that limitation of licenses should be considered by the responsible authorities, for it is bare-faced robbery when money is taken for a license for certain employment and those issuing such license well know there is no possible chance of such license being exercised, as hundreds can testify. The Commissioner of Police of London is responsible for this unlimited issue of licenses, for which he knows that the holders over and above those required for actual service, have no prospect of ever using them; therefore such issuing can only be of advantage to the employer by creating keener competition between man and man for employment by them having surplus labour at hand, and at their command, which tends to cut down wages and lengthen the hours, and degrade the bona-fide license-holder by surrounding him with incompetent men with whom he has to compete for employment, and is further an imposition and an outrage on all that claims to be constitutional and just, and I feel confident you will agree with me that this system, for which often the last five shillings that a man possesses, and for which women and children have to sacrifice the common necessities of life, demands some immediate reform.

You are all aware of the appointment of a Labour Commission by the late Government of this country. You have been represented on that Commission by Mr. Bowbrick, your General Secretary, Mr. Atkinson, your Treasurer, and your humble servant, who have truthfully, and without bias, submitted to the Commissioners on Labour your position in all its phases. The evidence of each individual, in its entirety, can be obtained at 2d. per copy, or will be sent direct from this office to any member for 3d. Men were found in your ranks—and I am particularly anxious that you should all read this evidence—who were prepared to submit evidence to the Commissioners in the interest of the employers, and claimed to be representative men from you, when practically they represented no one but themselves, and

they had the audacity to inform the Commissioners that you were all satisfied with long hours, and in fact, preferred them, (a voice, it's not true). This needs no contradiction from me, and I am of opinion that the Commissioners fully recognised the value of such wild assertions as were presented to them, though they would perhaps not go so far as to denounce as palpable lies. But black sheep and traitors to progress and to the sacred cause of Labour are to be found in all ranks of life, and evidently yours is not an exception to the rule. But when the evidence is carefully surveyed and decided upon by the Commissioners, we have confidence that your real position will be accurately estimated, and we hope many of the evils attending your everyday life will be altered and eradicated.(Hear, hear.)

Your wages individually and collectively are far too low and your hours excessively long, whilst to alter you must each and all of you, as representative men, urge upon the rank and file of this organization through your separate constituencies the imperative necessity and duty of each member to become a every-day perambulating agent, and canvass, canvass, canvass for members to solidify yourselves into an irresistible force. Remember where unorganization prevails wages are low and the hours long, entailing a life of drudgery and poverty from the cradle to the grave; but where organization is strong, improved conditions there reign, and a higher standard of comfort is on the hearth of every worker's home. Hence your present and your future condition rests with yourselves, and may you realize the grave responsibility which rests upon you not only for the benefit of yourselves, but particularly for the generations of men you are producing, and which have to follow in your trail.

It has become apparent that to be practical and progressive, the members of all the different grades comprising the street traffic trade of England should be concentrated in one gigantic Union, sectional and local Societies are weak, and seldom attain direct advantages, and it is satisfactory to know that at the present moment we are endeavouring—and with success—to so knit together your organization that you may be a national and united tower of strength, prepared to combat, if necessary, equally and successfully, with your adversaries, and a proposition, I believe, will be laid before you with this object, for the alteration of the name of your Society to "Amalgamated Carmen, Omnibus, Tram Workers' and Teamsters' Union of Great Britain and Ireland," which, I believe, will be favourably received.

As I have previously intimated to you that this Union commenced at the close, and was the outcome, of the great 'Bus Strike of London. You, none the less, must strictly guard yourselves against rash and precipitate conflict with employers by your cautious deliberation on all questions that come before you, and which, I claim, has so far been done, has been our policy, and will continue to be, at least, while I have a voice in deliberating on questions embodied with approaching dangers, and which vitally affect each and all of you. On such lines as I have indicated, we have already been successful in establishing an amicable understanding, improved conditions and friendly relationship between three powerful Companies and yourselves, and I am confident that with the exercise of tact, judgment due consideration and discretion this relationship will continue. (Hear, hear.)

Such, fellow workers, is a brief enumeration of your past and present position of life, of the work done on your behalf during the past eleven months. Your course is now clear, your

foundation is fixed on the rock of economy, and you will be able to build up a Union which will be a credit and beneficial to you all. (Cheers.)

Much lays before you for your deliberation and decision, and all in harmony with progress, and you men, who are to-day looked down upon as nobodies, will you understand and not treat with rigid indifference the power you possess. You, through whom the newspaper and literary press of England is conveyed from the machine to the reader, correspondence, and parcels of the Post Office are transmitted from individual to individual. All are equally dependent on you, from the monarch to the peasant. Then, you Carmen, Trainmen and Teamsters, whose occupation permeates every phase of life, and whose girdle encircles the globe of civilized industry, through which every production and commodity must pass from the earth to the consumer, will you arise and assert your power You have a right to demand and obtain more than 2d., 3d., or 4d. per hour in return for your labour, and a general reduction of hours, and this can be obtained by a conciliatory and peaceful policy if you are organized, and if you will it you can paralyze the commercial and industrial life of England.

You are face to face with many difficulties, attending the propagation of the great social question, which question is now attracting the attention of statesman and worker alike. Much, very much, remains for us all to do, before poverty is removed, before labour and wealth is more equally distributed. Much will be done by the municipalization of Trams and Omnibuses, which is now being generally considered and established by various municipalities, and is a policy and a system which has, I believe, your unanimous support, and with your continued endeavours in this direction you will ere long be able to see successfully achieved. Members of this Union, do possess yourselves of knowledge by daily and continuous education. Organize nationally by extending your Association between man and man, village and village, town and town, city and city, until your name becomes a household word among the vehicular workers. Centralize your forces. Concentrate your power and attention on all opposition from whatsoever quarter it may come. Sink your personal prejudices for individual usefulness and fellow feeling. March on the path of progress honestly, honourably and fearlessly, determined to eradicate the social evils of society by your active independent social and political propaganda. Trust yourselves only. Be true to each other. And when this is conceived and practised, when labour is true to herself, labour will control, dominate and distribute equally the wealth she produces. The land will be the common property of the people, poverty and despair will disappear for the replacement of a brighter life, loftier intelligence, and, above all, free and independent action in everything that tends to make the life of the toiler worth living. (Applause)

THE END