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Fighting a "Gob Fire" in An English Coal Mine

(By a British Miner)

The miner has many dangerous enemies to contend with in his occupation, but the "gob fire" is the most remorseless and dangerous of all.

Like volcanoes, "gob fires" may be divided into two classes: the "sleeping" and the "active." And, again, like volcanoes, the "sleeping" fire is apt to leap into sudden and dangerous activity.

The developments of a mine cursed with the "gob fire" has to be very carefully carried out, otherwise sudden disaster descends upon the un-

fortunate spectator.

Fighting a "gob fire" is an exciting and highly dangerous past-time, requiring an iron constitution and nerves of steel.

Immediately a mine manager is notified of an outbreak he has to adopt stringent methods to combat it.

All the men working in the "district" affected are brought out, and a score or so of the most practical and experienced of their number are "told off" to fight it.

Then the fight begins. First, the affected "district" is isolated by setting up a number of air-doors, thus cutting off the supply of air. The next step is to "wall in" the fire with bricks, sand, and rubble.

This is a costly as well as a dangerous task, for the fire may be anything from a hundred to a thousand square feet in dimensions, and very little imagination is required to conjure a mental picture of the magnitude of such a task.

The fire must not be allowed the slightest "breathing outlet," otherwise all your sand and bricks represent merely so much wasted labour and material. Every little loophole through which air may pass must be effectively closed, or a week's strenuous labor and endeavor are overcome in less than an hour.

Again, it must be remembered that men for "gob-fire" fighting are difficult to get, for very few possess the pluck and physical strength to with-

stand the dangers and hardships of the work.

These men have to work in a confined space, where in all probability there is more gas than air, and where also there is tremendous heat. Only very strong men can stand such an enormous strain.

Add to these dangers the possibility of an explosion—swift, sudden, and relentless—bringing in its train a ghastly and hideous death, and you will have some idea of what the "gob fire" fighter has to contend with in his task.

Once the air supply has been completely "shut off" the fire will gradually commence to "die," but it will not burn completely out. It will last for years, smouldering sullenly, always a menace and a nightmare to both managers and men, the slightest whiff of air being sufficient to revive it to its original fierce intensity. Providing that every precaution is taken in the development of the mine there is no immediate danger from the "gob fire," but once let it—as the miners are doing to-day—get beyond control, then—disaster!

Capital, Labor and the Public.

A healthy relationship between capital and labor is largely a question of balance. This involves the mutual interests of the workers and of the employer and of the public—including all workers and employers—in order that there may be a fair return in interest for capital and wages for labor from a product which can be successfully marketed. In the maintenance of this balance there must be continual adjustments. Economic conditions do not stay fixed.

Through the organization of labor unions the status of many of the workers has been greatly improved. A few old-fashioned autocrats helped to give the movement impetus. The unions greatly increased their control of the labor situation during the period of great demand occasioned by the war and marked by the employment of millions in military activities. Now we are experiencing a period of readjustment. Prices of agricultural products have descended to pre-war levels. Basic materials of all kinds have been drawn into the downward movement. Labor, in many cases, is endeavoring to hold to war-time price levels. But labor is, after all, a commodity, and it seems inevitable that the labor cost factor in production must also come down whether by lower wages, greater efficiency or better organization.

In such a situation the labor leaders must carefully consider the danger of abusing their powers to the detriment of the interests of the union workers themselves as well as of capital and the public. Apart from the question of wages and hours one weakness in the policy of some unions is the desire to put all member workers on a similar level, no matter what their ability, capacity, or willingness may be. This leads to inefficiency and provides a very important, though not apparent, factor in relation to the cost of production, thus upsetting the balance as between capital and labor on the one hand and producer and consumer on the other.

During the past twenty years or so—and particularly since 1914—unions have been an important factor in raising the wage standards and securing other favors for their members in regard to hours and conditions. To-

day labor leaders must consider how best the labor cost factor in production can be reduced in order that the benefits of lower prices for materials may become general and cut down the cost of living. To ignore this phase of the question will only mean that the real benefits of the labor movement may be lost.—Financial Post.

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