

# SIDELIGHTS ON THE LABOR CONGRESS

The strange case of Delegate Crothers occupied the Labor Congress for an hour and a half, and was then looked at through a new sidelight, without anything very surprising happening. Delegate Crothers is the representative of the Boss Cabinet-makers' Union, No. 1, headquarters Ottawa. He appeared just as the charges against him were being called, and was urged to the platform amid the critical silence of all but two or three of his brethren, whose applause meant more for courtesy than for love, died down before he had advanced half a dozen steps up the floor.

When he came to the scratch he smiled an unhappy smile. He wasn't very much concerned to answer charges just there and then. That was a mild and thoroughly Ministerial way of intimating that everybody might go to everlasting swank,

while he did his duty as he saw it, whatever delegates might think and say and do. At the end of his discourse, which was in parts, a pretty good defence, he said: "I have nothing to retract, nothing to withdraw, nothing to apologize for."

The delegate from Ottawa was accused of having, in bad faith, played the Industrial Disputes Act (familiarly known by the name of Delegate Lemieux, whose child it is), against the miners at the asbestos deposits at Thetford, in Quebec. He was arraigned in a resolution, which the Resolutions Committee endorses, but which the Chairman Rigg, who also sits in the Manitoba Legislature, was careful to say was endorsed on the evidence submitted to it by the representatives of the incriminating organization.

A shrewd, earnest, clear head is

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Delegate Rigg. If he didn't come from somewhere about Lancashire when he was quite young, his tongue has a strange power of suggesting something that is not so. He looks brainy—and he is. He was a book-binder before he became the business manager of the Winnipeg Trades Council. He has an expository gift which is not unworthily comparable to that of Sir Allen Aylesworth, the finest model of lucidity in Canadian law or politics.

Rigg put into clearer, more terse language the complaint made by Delegate Francq of Montreal, who spoke for Thetford. Francq is a Belgian printer, a big stout moustachioed apostle of toil, who is the French interpreter for the Congress. He is a reservist who is regarded as a valuable aide in Canada by the Belgian Government. One of his sons is fighting under King Albert. Another is fighting under Joffre. Hear the complaint against Delegate Crothers:

The Thetford asbestos miners (who are said to suffer more fatalities in the open pits than happen in the trenches) had 25 cents cut off their wages when the war came—they went down to \$1.50. After about a year the cut was restored. Later the rate went up to \$2. Last summer they asked for more, and didn't seem likely to get it. They went to Delegate Crothers' department, and were told theirs was a case for the Industrial Disputes Board, and that it would be a crime to strike.

All right, said they, then give us a conciliatory board. Then Delegate Crothers said that as five companies were concerned, a board couldn't be granted under the Act. So the men struck—a thousand of them. In three weeks they got an additional 25 cents a day. Meantime men from the Spirit Lake Internment Camp were brought, under armed guards, to work in the mines. Some of them got no wages. One man was given a bill for \$6.10, the difference between the worth of his work and the cost of his grub. If the Conciliation Act can be made to balk its job at the caprice of the Minister, well, it's no good. This is the worst case that has happened under the much-lauded statute, and Delegate Crothers has not added to his popularity by his strange conduct.

## The Minister's Side of It.

Delegate Crothers tells a rather different story. The asbestos people, after reverting to the pre-war wages scale, put on an extra quarter without being asked. A dollar seventy-five has been declared by two recent boards, sitting not far from Thetford, to be a fair wage in that region. The five companies refused to agree to appoint a member of the proposed board. He declined to appoint five boards, which was the alternative. He would do it again, under like circumstances. He evolved a method as near the Act as possible. He understood that the companies were willing to grant another 25 cents a day. He didn't believe a board would advise so large an advance. He sent a commissioner to Thetford to get the facts. In three weeks he made a settlement, at \$2.25 a day, the original agreement for which, signed by two miners from each mine, he produced to Congress.

Besides, he was told that a local union was formed a good while before the Western mines formed a branch. There was a dispute between the unions as to what should be done. Where unions did not agree, he always refused boards—and should do it again. As to interned men being brought in, that was decided on before trouble developed, and he had nothing to do with it. It was done in accord with war policy which demanded that the output of asbestos should be maintained, and the scarcity of labor warranted the Government giving consent. No apology, no apology, was delegate Crothers' attitude. "He hasn't the sense to know what a volcano he is sitting on," said a delegate who knows something about volcanoes. It did not seem to have occurred to Delegate Crothers that he could have appointed one board for one company to see whether the other companies, whose receipts had been multiplied by three, would defy the finding.

## Asbestos Price Trebled.

Delegate Crothers' position was further assailed. There is a second union, but it only came into being after the absolutely non-union strike of last year, and was contemporaneous with a Western Miners' Branch. Indeed, it is a "Confessional Union," which means that only men of a certain faith can belong to it. Congress is asked in another resolution to condemn the manoeuvres in connection with it, because the Church is said to have a prejudicial influence upon organized labor at Thetford. And, let it be remembered, though the wages were reduced below the living point when the war came, the mine owners did not revert to the old standard till the men let them understand they realized that asbestos had advanced from \$200 to \$600 per ton.

Delegate Crothers said nothing about this little circumstance when he was praising the mine operators for raising wages without being asked. Delegate Crothers is plainly in wrong with his constituency. He is all right as a lawyer, and no doubt

as a politician he has had successes. But he does not understand the labor movement. He may do the best he knows for it as for a client, whom he sees through purely legal spectacles. Labor seems to think he has other and more seductive clients. So it gives him cold looks and derisive comments, and now and then a laugh which he doesn't like. He is a Minister of the Crown, too, and was not intended to be laughed at. Strange case—strange case.