

## MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

THURSDAY, 18TH AUGUST, 1904.

WILLIAM ROBERT LEATHER examined. (No. 1.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What are you, Mr. Leather?—President of the Miners' Union, and check-weighman for them at present.

2. Do you wish to make a statement?—Yes, sir. For the purpose of starting a new coal industry in Huntly there was formed on the 2nd July, 1902, what is known as the Huntly Coal-prospecting Syndicate, being a body of sixteen working-men. After deciding upon the locality in which to start boring operations it was resolved to interview the Commissioner of Crown Lands, and ascertain what concessions were given to prospectors, with a view to take up an area for the purposes of coal-mining. The locality intended to be prospected was given up by the Waikato Coal and Shipping Company some twenty years ago, after considering boring as barren. After explaining the position to the Commissioner, our representative was instructed to apply for a portion to prove it first, and meanwhile the Land Board would leave the matter in abeyance until such time as we had convinced ourselves as to the coal-bearing strata of the locality. Within twenty-four hours of our application being lodged a representative of the Taupiri Coal Company applied to the Land Office to take up the whole area of Lake Wahi, but was informed that it was protected for the Huntly Coal-prospecting Syndicate. We then commenced hand-boring, and the men who were employed were men who had been refused work at the Taupiri Company, whilst strangers had no difficulty in getting employment. When we had bored 160 ft. we encountered the same difficulty that the Waikato Coal Company had encountered—namely, a boulder-bed. We were then held up to ridicule and sarcasm by the old identities and some of the principals of the Taupiri Company, but after a considerable amount of hard work and perseverance we succeeded in getting through the boulder-bed, which cost us about £1 per inch. We then decided to engage Mr. Gilberd, a machine borer, who had just completed operations for the Taupiri Company, to complete the borehole, which was then in easy ground, the result being three seams of coal. The Taupiri Company immediately engaged Mr. Gilberd to bore two more holes on their property, after doing which he promised to bore further for us. Pending the borer's operations we applied to the Land Board, after explaining the circumstances, for six months' protection, which was granted. Now, instead of boring two holes as he promised, the borer put down five holes, which curtailed our time for boring operations. In the meantime a member of the Taupiri Company once more applied to the Land Board, thinking that we had forfeited our rights to Lake Wahi, but was told again that it was still protected for six months. When we resumed boring operations we put down three more holes, and being more successful than the first, and our protection drawing to a close—i.e., wanting two months, we decided to apply for the whole area of Lakes Wahi and Rotoiti, comprising 1,300 acres, more or less. This was under the limit allowed by the Coal-mines Act of 1891—namely, 2,000 acres. Our representative, on meeting the Commissioner at the sitting of the Land Board, was told that there were two other applicants for portions of the said lakes—namely, the Taupiri Company and J. R. Hetherington. Neither of the said parties had spent one shilling in finding the coal. This was a breach of our mining laws, which are based on priority. Now, it appears that a third applicant applied for the balance of Lakes Wahi and Rotoiti, if any, and was informed that the whole area was fully applied for. This applicant stood in the same position as the Taupiri Company, and why was he refused? No doubt the Taupiri Company has a friend at Court in the person of Mr. Gordon, Director of the Taupiri Company and Advising Engineer to the State Coal-mines Department; and Mr. Alison, member for Waitemata, stated at a meeting of shareholders of the Taupiri Company that the Lands Department had refused on two occasions to receive an application from them, and that after much pressure had been brought to bear 250 acres of Lake Wahi had been granted. Why this pressure? If this is the policy of the administration of our laws, woe betide our country. It was suggested through the Commissioner that the parties interested should meet with a view to settlement. A Mr. Ralph, a representative of the Taupiri Company, then met our representative, and after considerable discussion Mr. Ralph inquired the minimum for which the syndicate would relinquish their claim in favour of the Taupiri Company. The syndicate inquired as to the terms of the offer, and Mr. Ralph stated that they would like it all put in royalty, but he was informed that we could not consider his offer. He then stated that if we wanted any cash it would have to be a very small amount. We considered the terms absurd, as previous to this he had received from the Taupiri Company £15,000 in cash and shares, besides royalty, for a property not to be compared with the one in dispute. We (the syndicate) then sent a representative to Wellington to interview Ministers. The Right Hon. the Premier stated to our representative that if the parties could not agree the Government would hang the matter up. After considerable delay the Government sent to Huntly Mr. Hayes, Inspector of Mines, and Mr. Mueller, Commissioner of Crown Lands, to report on the property and to interview the syndicate. Their report was that the area was not all coal-bearing. They stated that the Government intended making a subdivision, and advised us to make a fresh application for portions of the area in dispute; but wiser counsels prevailed, and we did not do so. The Taupiri Company applied as requested, as they had all to gain and nothing to lose. A deputation from the syndicate met the Hon. the Minister for Mines when he was in Auckland, and he stated that the Mines Department was acting on the report and advice of the Inspector and Commissioner, who had