MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

THURSDAY, 20TH SEPTEMBER, 1906.

EWEN WILLIAM ALISON, M.H.R., examined. (No. 1.)

1. *The Chairman.*] Whom do you represent?—I am chairman of the Taupiri Coal Company, of Auckland.

2. You have read the Bill now before this Committee—the Coal-mines Act Amendment Bill, introduced by Mr. Colvin?—I have.

3. You want to make a statement with regard to clause 2?—Yes. I have received the following telegram from the secretary of the Taupiri Coal Company: "Auckland, 19/9/06.—Directors of Taupiri Coal-mines request you to give evidence before the Mines Committee, and strongly oppose amendment of Coal-mines Act. Company object to be continually brought into conflict with their workmen by new legislation being passed every year. Matters should be left to Arbitration Court to decide. If Bill becomes law it will increase expenses to such an extent as to necessitate raising the price of coal, which it is desirable to avoid.—F. SCHERIFF." The telegram refers to Mr. Colvin's Bill, because it asks that the matters shall be left to the Arbitration Court to decide. The objection which is taken by the Taupiri Coal-mines Company, and also by other coal-mining companies in which I am interested, is that under clause 2 of the Bill the operation of the Conciliation and Arbitration Act is set aside, and that the effect of such legislation would be to interfere with the functions of the Arbitration Court. They contend that the hours of workers in connection with coal-mines, both underground and on the surface, should not be fixed by statute law, but by the Arbitration Court after full inquiry, as far as I know. There has been no dissatisfaction whatever expressed by the workers, either underground or on the surface, with reference to the hours fixed by the Arbitration Court in any coal-mines award at Auckland, and there has been no difficulty between the employers and the workers in fixing the working-hours in coal-mines at Auckland. There has been no contention over that question. In each dispute the working-hours have been mutually agreed upon. The operation of clause 2 will be seriously detrimental to the working of the Taupiri Coal-mines, where the workings are extensive and the headings extended very considerable distances. If this Bill becomes law one of two conditions of things must be brought about—either the price of coal must be increased to the consumer, or the wages of the workers must be reduced. It is undesirable that either the wages of the workers should be reduced or that the price of the coal should be increased to the consumer. Seeing that the workers at Auckland, at any rate, do not desire that this Bill should become law, and that there has been no difficulty or dissatisfaction there in respect to the hours of labour fixed by the Arbitration Court, the Taupiri Coal-mines and other mines at Auckland are unanimous in their opposition to the Bill, and are clearly of opinion that the operation of clause 2, if made law, will be seriously detrimental to the successful working of the mines, and will also be prejudicial to the interests of the workmen.

4. *Hon. Mr. McGowan.*] You say that one of two courses will take place if this clause you refer to is passed—namely, that the price of coal will be increased or wages must be lowered?—Yes, one of those conditions will happen.

5. Have you any knowledge as to whether the men have expressed any opinion with reference to lowering the wages?—I have heard no reference to that effect, but an increase has been suggested. There has been no difference of opinion with regard to the working-hours—there has not been one word of dissatisfaction expressed so far as I am aware.

6. *Mr. Colvin.*] Are the men working under any award with your company?—Yes.

7. How long is it since the award came into force?—I was unaware until last evening that I should be called upon to give evidence, and did not anticipate being the first witness. I have communicated with the manager with a view to ascertaining that. I think it was about two and a half to three years ago.

8. Have the men asked for another award to be made since that time?—They have asked recently that there should be a conference between the directors and themselves with the view of arriving at an amicable settlement of demands they are making. The question of an alteration of the hours of working, as far as I know, has not been suggested.

9. You are aware that if any award is made by the Arbitration Court now it is provided already by statute that the mines must come under this clause?—I do not follow you. If an award is now made, the Arbitration Court cannot fix the hours because they are fixed by statute.

10. Yes, under the Act of 1903; if the Arbitration Court makes an award the companies must come under that Act?—That is so.

11. That is to say, it is provided by statute now that the hours of working should be from bank to bank?—Yes, that is the objection the mining companies have to the Bill, which, they contend, should not become law, because under clause 2 the working-hours would not be fixed by mutual agreement or by the Arbitration Court, but by Act of Parliament.

12. And if the men say that they are willing to come under an award, no matter what the consequences are, if their working-hours are from bank to bank, do you not think it would be right if such an award were made?—Fixing the hours of labour in accordance with clause 2 of the Bill?

13. Yes?—I consider the working-hours is a matter for the Arbitration Court to decide. But under the provisions of clause 2 of your Bill there is no option. The hours are fixed. Clause 2 provides, "Every workman employed underground in a mine shall be entitled to be paid overtime when he is employed underground for more than eight hours in any day, counting from the time he enters the underground workings of the mine to the time he leaves the same."