

Clause 29 increases the contributions of members who joined the Service prior to the 1st January, 1908, and here again the State proposes to break its contract with many of the contributors. These members voluntarily or compulsorily accepted the conditions laid down by the contract, and even if the State did make a bad bargain it is not justified in altering the contract.

Section 125 of the principal Act specifically provided against interference of the conditions or benefits provided under the Act, and provided that they would not be prejudicially affected by the repeal or amendment of the Act.

Even although the contributions were increased from 3 per cent. to 5 per cent. in 1908, the Government agreed that its previous contracts should remain inviolate. Every Government since has been opposed to breaking the contract in operation at the time it was entered into, hence no alteration has been made retrospective.

One of the most drastic proposals from the point of view of my Association is contained in clause 30, whereby subsection (1) of section 102 of the principal Act is repealed.

Subsection (1) of section 102 of the principal Act enables a contributor whose length of service in the Department is not less than forty years, or whose age is not less than sixty years, to retire from the Service at the expiration of three months' notice of his intention so to do, while the Board may, with the consent of the Minister, extend the provisions of this section to any case where the contributors' service is not less than thirty-five years.

I desire to record the strongest possible protest against any interference with the present right of retirement for locomotive men.

The conditions of service in the Locomotive Department are of a particularly strenuous nature, involving both physical and mental strain. The men have no regular hours of duty, and they have no regular hours for meals or rest. They are on duty at all hours of the day and night, and are subject during the whole of their careers to the greatest extremes of heat and cold. The conditions of work in the Locomotive Department have been considerably speeded up, while the work has become intense to a degree never before experienced.

It is an acknowledged fact that the geographical contour of this country makes the operations of trains a difficult problem.

The speed of trains in New Zealand is as high as that of any other country in the world having a similar gauge, and it is believed that owing to the small diameter of the wheels the piston-speed is the highest in the world. This fact produces excessive vibration and hard riding, and imposes a severe strain on enginemen.

The great increase in motor transport, with the ever present danger of level-crossing accidents (there is almost one level crossing for every mile of railway), is also an important factor which calls for greater alertness and produces more strain on the men.

The whole trend of modern railway development is to throw greater responsibility and greater strain on locomotive men. Such conditions bring about a greater drain on their vitality, and in consequence imposes a certain degree of physical incompetence which increases with age. The effect of this Bill would increase to a larger degree this physical incompetence through a lower vitality on account of age, and the effect would be that men would be driving trains under the most difficult conditions when up to sixty-five years of age.

The men realize that this physical and mental strain in advancing years is inimical to public safety, and they have for years past made constantly increasing requests that locomotive men should be allowed to retire after thirty-five years' service.

We still want that, and of right.

The Railways have a record of 150 million passengers carried in six years without one fatality, and I ask members of the Committee if such a record should be endangered by increasing the retiring-age.

I just want to leave the statement for a moment and call attention to the difficult work of the locomotive men. I want to quote to the Committee part of a letter which I have received during the last week or so in connection with the nature of their work. This letter refers to a run of two hundred miles and which involves being on duty ten hours: "The road is most exacting on the engine-crew, which makes the work extremely arduous. There are twenty-eight tunnels, and only two stretches of straight flat road about two miles each way. The remainder of the distance is curves and hills. Local officers admit the arduous nature of the work, and the men are continually complaining of being over-tired and of not being able to get a few minutes in order to get a bite to eat. To eat at all it is necessary to do so with a shovel or lever in one hand, and a piece of bread in the other, and it is impossible to get a drink except water or stewed tea. The result of this is that when a man does get home he is so tired and done up that he does not feel like having the only decent meal possible that day." That is the way the men look on the position, and these are men who are in the prime of life, probably thirty or thirty-five years of age. How would a run like this affect men of sixty-five years of age when it is too hard and arduous for them at thirty-five years of age?

There is another point I would like to make. The general opinion of some people in this country is that members of Parliament spend half their time probably attending to their work in the House and the other half travelling in the train. To use the words of the Commission, "Be that as it may." The question of safe travelling is one of vital importance to members of the Committee. You have to run the gauntlet of an election every three, perhaps every four, years, and I would ask the Committee to ensure their seats in the House by voting this clause out of the Bill. When you throw the whole Bill out make sure this clause is in it, because you are running a very grave risk of losing your seats in the House if you do not do so. I would suggest that you make the necessary arrangements to travel on the engine of the "Limited" express on some dark winter night travelling at fifty miles an hour, and see whether you would like a man sixty-five years of age to be at the throttle.