

SECRET

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MISC 101(84) 6th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 2 APRIL 1984 at 10.30 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Leon Brittan QC MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Norman Tebbit MP
Secretary of State for
Trade and Industry

The Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Mr John Stanley MP
Minister of State for the
Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence

Mr David Mitchell MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of
State, Department of Transport

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

SECRET AND PERSONAL

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that the position that morning had improved compared with the previous week. More miners were at work and the number of pits fully on strike had reduced from 130 a week previously to 120 that morning. There had for some days been intermittent, light picketing at power stations. Nevertheless, 450,000 tonnes of coal had been moved to the power stations the previous week and 650,000 tonnes of coal had been moved altogether. Out of 7 rail depots located in areas which were still working, 4 were reported as working normally that morning, with the remaining 3 not working normally due to action by the Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF). The view of the National Coal Board (NCB) was that any action by the British Rail (BR) Board against ASLEF likely to escalate the dispute was undesirable, both because of the need to maintain for as long as possible those rail deliveries which were continuing and because such action would reduce the effectiveness of pressure being brought to bear locally on ASLEF from within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in areas which had voted to continue to work.

Fourteen out of 24 members of the NUM National Executive were now mandated to support proposals for a national ballot. It would be conducive to a favourable outcome from a ballot to focus attention as far as possible on the NCB pay offer on recently improved severance terms which would apply in the case of closures and on the high level of investment proposed for the coal industry, all of which were matters at the heart of the dispute.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there had been no major change in the position as regards law and order. Police activity that morning had focussed largely on Lancashire. There had been unconfirmed reports, which were being further investigated, that some men had been physically prevented from going into one pit in Scotland, but otherwise those wishing to go to their place of work in Lancashire and elsewhere had been able to do so.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that liquid steel production the previous week had been some 30-40,000 tonnes down compared with an average week, though deliveries had been only marginally affected. The coke ship which had been due at Teesside at the weekend had been unloaded by members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) despite union instructions to the contrary. There was a need for both coke and coal to be moved soon to Llanwern from Port Talbot. For Scunthorpe to stay in production, it would be necessary to obtain coal from Teesside within a week or so: the rail links to the works was currently cut by NUM pickets. Pressure on the British Steel Corporation (BSC) to take action to ensure supplies was likely to increase over the next few days. Mr McGahey and Mr Sirs were reported to be meeting that afternoon to discuss the question of supplies of coal for Ravenscraig, to which trains were currently running from Hunterston. There must be some likelihood that a failure by Mr McGahey and Mr Sirs to agree might affect the level of support from the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) for the dispute. If agreement was reached, it was possible that the terms might provide a helpful precedent for similar arrangements in respect of Llanwern and Scunthorpe.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT, said that ASLEF had announced the previous Friday that they were instructing their branches to black movements of coal. It appeared that such instructions had not been received at ASLEF branches by that morning. The Chairman of the BR Board reported that all depots were operating, though some individual drivers had refused to drive trains. These drivers had been given time for reflection, following which those still refusing would be sent home without pay. The Board's intention was to handle the situation firmly but coolly, not asking men to cross picket lines but otherwise requiring them to work normally. The Board's lawyers were keeping developments under review and the Government would be informed if the Board was considering legal action. Meanwhile, the National Union of Railwaymen and National Union of Seamen were discussing the dispute at meetings later that day and on the following day respectively. It was likely that instructions might be received by ASLEF branches from their Executive in the course of the day. It was therefore possible that the transport position might soon deteriorate sharply.

THE MINISTER FOR THE ARMED FORCES said that the Ministry of Defence, while maintaining the lowest possible profile, had responded to requests to provide accommodation and messing facilities for a number of police personnel. Requests for certain other assistance and facilities had been declined as likely to be counter-productive. There was some prospect that a Parliamentary Question might be tabled about the role of the services in the dispute. In response to such a Question, he proposed to say that certain standard plans existed for the use of servicemen to maintain essential services, but no special contingency planning was taking place for service involvement in this dispute.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that increases that morning in the number of miners and pits at work in Lancashire and more generally were encouraging. In view of the tendency in some quarters to exaggerate the effects of the dispute, it was desirable that the true facts of the present position should be brought out more clearly. The Government's objective should be to maintain their policy of non-involvement in the dispute, while ensuring that as much coal as possible continued to be delivered in the period up to and beyond the meeting of the NUM National Executive on 12 April. With this in view, the Group welcomed the intention of the BR Board to keep the temperature down and to keep as many drivers of coal trains as possible at work. It seemed likely that ASLEF would continue to come under local pressure not to prevent the movement of coal from pits where miners had decided in accordance with union procedures not to strike: the return to work in Lancashire provided a useful context in which this argument could be deployed. Handling the rail unions was a matter for the British Rail Board, but there was likely to be advantage in their consulting the NCB at the most senior levels. The Group had noted that the BR Board would inform the Government if legal action was contemplated, though it was important to avoid any suggestion that recourse by the Board to legal remedies was in any sense subject to Government direction. The Group would meet again on Wednesday 4 April.

The Group -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office

2 April 1984