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MISC 101(84) 21st Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
WEDNESDAY 20 JUNE 1984 at 10.15 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 Nigel Lawson MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP  
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon George Younger MP  
Secretary of State for Scotland

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 Sir Michael Havers QC MP  
Attorney General

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

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong  
Mr P L Gregson  
Brigadier J A J Budd  
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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## INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that 43 pits were working normally that day. A further 2 which would otherwise be working normally were on holiday. In addition, there were 7 pits producing some coal and a further 5 with some men in. In Scotland, Bilston Glen should produce some coal that afternoon for the first time since the limited return to work there had begun. Movements of coal for the week so far were consistent with levels achieved in recent weeks.

The regular monthly meeting had taken place on the previous day between the National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) and British Association of Colliery Managers (BACM). There had been some criticism of the interview with Mr MacGregor which had been published in "The Times" on 12 June, the day before talks between the NCB and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were due to resume. Both NACODS and BACM were clearly worried about damage to pits if the strike continued and were anxious that it should be brought to an early conclusion.

The NCB were aware that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) were considering seeking an injunction against the NUM. He understood the Board's view to be that this would be untimely and likely to swing the support of other unions behind the NUM.

He understood that the NCB were considering changes in their publicity arrangements. The Chairman of the Board had arranged to keep him informed. A letter from the NCB to individual miners had been posted that morning. It included a strong paragraph on the danger that continuation of the strike might physically damage pits. This was thought to be the subject of serious anxiety on the part of many striking miners. A further letter to miners, to be distributed locally, was planned.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that no large-scale picketing had been reported that morning.



THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT said that, in the 24 hours to 4.00 am that morning, the steel works at Ravenscraig had received 4 coal trains, double the daily requirement for the plant. Llanwern had received 4 coal trains and 6 coke trains. Railwaymen had refused to run trains that morning either to Ravenscraig or Llanwern, however.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that steel production by the BSC for the previous week had been 267,000 tonnes, only 12,000 tonnes short of the target levels set before the strike occurred. Picketing of steelworks that morning was light. At Llanwern, the NUM had asked for a further meeting with representatives of steel workers. BSC had been asked to agree that supplies would not be moved by road before that meeting took place. They had agreed, but had made it clear that no agreement which required either the banking of furnaces or a substantial reduction in production would be acceptable to them. The Corporation had made contingency arrangements for the use of 30 lorries to move coal and coke to Llanwern. They would need 50-60 lorries if the plant was to be satisfactorily supplied by road alone and double that number if it were necessary also to move ore by road.

Plans at Ravenscraig to revert to arrangements for supplies by road would be put into operation by that afternoon following the refusal of railwaymen to operate the coal trains due that morning. There was no immediate foreseeable need to bank down furnaces at either plant. If a prolonged interruption of supplies seemed likely, however, they would need to reach a judgement soon, particularly at Llanwern, on when it would be prudent to bank down furnaces so as to allow them to endure in that condition.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

- a. The police were bearing the brunt of violence in the dispute. In such circumstances it was increasingly difficult for the general public to understand why the civil law was not being invoked. Even if an injunction could not stop mass picketing immediately, it might do so in time through attrition of union resources due to damages and fines for non-compliance.



b. On the other hand, it could be argued that recourse to the civil law by employers at present would not offer any real relief to the police and would be likely to have unwelcome effects on the course of the dispute. It would tend to swing union support, which at present was divided and irresolute, behind the strike leadership and would run the risk of provoking sympathetic action on the railways and at other vulnerable points. There must also be some doubt about the ability of the courts to gain effective access to NUM funds in the event of non-payment of fines or damages.

c. It was likely the pressure for an independent inquiry or mediation would grow. However the NUM's present intransigent attitude made it impossible that intervention by a third party could provide a resolution of the dispute which would be fair to the taxpayer and would be genuinely in the interests of the coal industry in the future.

d. It might be to the advantage of the NCB to proceed before the dispute ended with closure of some of the most uneconomic pits. If handled sensitively in a way which demonstrated sympathy for the interests of those who would continue to work in the industry, such closures might succeed in eroding the constituency of the strike leadership, demonstrating the truth of the NCB's assurance of no compulsory redundancy during the present tranche of closures. Handling closures in this way would, however, carry significant industrial relations risks requiring serious consideration.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that Cabinet would resume discussion of the dispute on the following day. They would wish to discuss any significant developments in picketing and in attempts to black coal supplies to steel works. In the light of events, it might also be appropriate on the following day or subsequently to discuss further the place of the criminal and civil law in the dispute.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

21 June 1984