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MISC 101 (84) 22nd Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 27 JUNE 1984 at 10.30 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

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 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

The Rt Hon 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
Mr P L Gregson
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that 41 pits were working normally that day. Six which would otherwise be working normally were on holiday. Figures for attendances showed an increase of 1,400 to 1,500 compared with the previous week. The total now working was about 67,000 about 53,000 of whom were directly involved in producing and handling coal at pits. Bilston Glen and Shirebrook, where production has been resumed since the beginning of the strike, were key pits in the effort to keep up, and if possible increase, the momentum of the return to work. In spite of intensive picketing and intimidation, attendances there were being maintained and, at Shirebrook, slightly increased.

In one case where a Magistrates' Court had convicted a striker of violence against a working miner, it was reported that the penalty imposed had been a fine of £70.

Total movements during the previous week had been 660,000 tonnes, compared with recent movements in excess of 700,000 tonnes. The main cause of the drop was the disruption of traffic to Llanwern and Ravenscraig. Although total movements for the present week were likely to be lower than those for the previous week, deliveries to power stations would be maintained not significantly below the levels achieved in recent weeks. In spite of decisions by both rail unions to pay a full day's pay to men sent home for refusal to run trains, 21 trains had run to power stations on the previous day. Movements by road were being stepped up so as to offset as far as possible the lost rail traffic.

Open cast production continued to make a limited contribution to deliveries, as did coal imports. The marked effect of the dispute on imports generally would be apparent when trade figures were published for April and May.

He was being kept informed about the continuing efforts of the Chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB) to improve the Board's public presentation of its side in the dispute. Mr Scargill's recent statement on television that he was prepared to break both the civil and criminal law in the interests of his union had been allowed to pass with surprisingly little comment in the media.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that picketing that day had been light. This might be owing to the demonstration, in London that day in support of the strike. In keeping with normal practice, police resources released by a relaxation of picketing at pits would be used to counter intimidation in mining communities.

In response to requests from the court authorities, the Lord Chancellor was making arrangements for the appointment of Stipendiary Magistrates to deal with the increased workload for the Magistrates' Courts at Rotherham and Chesterfield.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT said that British Rail (BR) had run 23 coal trains on 25 June: the figure for 26 June, 37 trains, was the lowest for a Tuesday during the dispute. BR expected to run a similar number of trains that day. Some trains continued to run from the Shirebrook depot, though traffic from Coalville had ceased after the imposition of stricter discipline by BR, rather than expanding as had been hoped.

On 25 June, the British Steel Corporation (BSC) plant at Ravenscraig had received no coal trains but 6 ore trains. On 26 June, 5 out of 8 scheduled trains had run: the loss of 3 trains was due, not to industrial action, but to mechanical failures. Llanwern had received on 26 June only 1 of 5 scheduled ore trains: the remainder had been lost, owing to refusals by BR staff to drive them.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND said that large quantities of coal continued to be delivered to Ravenscraig in spite of the halting of rail traffic. On the previous day, 431 lorry loads had been received, equivalent to 10,000 tonnes. BSC management believed that it would be possible also to arrange for a delivery of ore by road if rail deliveries were lost.

At Bilston Glen, the police had continued to cope efficiently with picketing and had ensured that the 30 workers at the pit not involved in providing safety cover were able to get in and out. 100-150 tonnes per day were being produced. It was heartening that the 2 miners who had been assaulted by strikers had insisted on returning to work on the following morning. Four men had been charged in connection with the assaults and bailed to appear before the Sheriff in due course.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that he had received no reports of serious problems with supplies of coal to industry, in spite of some signs of incipient difficulty in Scotland.

At the steel works, the operation to move coal by road to Ravenscraig appeared to be going well. For the time being, arrangements for supplying coal to Llanwern were also operating satisfactorily, but BSC would bank their furnaces in the event of any interruption to supply which was not of the most fleeting kind. Stocks held at the plant were enough for normal operations for 2 weeks or for 4 weeks' operations using 1 furnace only.

The Chairman of BSC was beginning to detect a tendency on the part of customers to look for more certain sources of supply abroad, rather than to rely on continued production by the Corporation. Continuing pressure from secondary picketing was also creating some problems of morale within the Corporation in spite of its success so far in maintaining a high percentage of normal output in spite of the strike. It was possible that the Chairman might wish to seek an injunction shortly. He understood however, that the Chairman had it in mind first to seek a meeting with the Chairmen of BR and the National Coal Board (NCB) to discuss the possible repercussions for all the Boards affected by the strike if one were to take out an injunction against secondary picketing. If the BSC were to go ahead, it was likely that they would seek an injunction in the first instance against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) requiring the removal of secondary pickets from railway lines into steel works. There would clearly be a real possibility that such an application might have to be followed by an injunction against the rail unions if they were to instruct members not to deliver to steel works even if pickets had been removed.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

- a. For reasons identified in previous discussions, it was not clear that the balance of advantage would lie at this juncture in the dispute with action under the civil law by BSC or another employer. There would clearly be advantage, in particular, if no injunction were sought before the end of the NLR Conference on 4 July. Recourse to the civil law was, however, a matter for the managements concerned, whose decisions it was not for the Government to override.
- b. The intention of the Chairman of BSC to consult Chairmen of the other nationalised industries concerned before taking any decision on recourse to the civil law was welcome. It would be desirable that such discussions should include the Chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), as well as the Chairmen of BR and NCB. It was to be hoped that the Chairmen would give careful consideration to the wider implications of any legal action on the course of the dispute, as well as to their own immediate commercial considerations. It was understood that it would be the intention of the Chairman to inform the Government via the appropriate sponsoring Minister if, following their meeting, any of them had it in mind to seek an injunction.
- c. It was doubtful whether the meeting to take place on 29 June between the National Executives of the NUM and Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) would produce an agreement on supplies to steel works which would be acceptable to the BSC and to the unions. It was understood that BSC intended to make it clear in advance of this meeting that any failure to ensure adequate supply for any major steelworks would require production there to cease; and that there could be no guarantee that, once closed, a plant would reopen.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Government should concentrate its efforts in relation to the dispute on two fronts. First, it should continue to give every encouragement and support to the police in dealing with violent picketing and intimidation

in order both to minimise the disincentives for miners to return to work in increasing numbers and to facilitate the prosecution and conviction of those responsible for serious crimes of violence and intimidation. Secondly, they should encourage and support efforts by the NCB to achieve improvements in the effective communication of its case in the dispute to the public and to miners, both through direct contacts with NCB employees and through the media. She and other senior Ministers should be prepared to take appropriate opportunities in speeches to put the factual record straight where that appeared necessary in the interests of balanced and truthful reporting of the dispute. The Group had noted the intention of the Chairman of BSC to arrange for a meeting with the other nationalised industry Chairmen affected by the dispute; they hoped that this meeting would include the Chairman of the CEGB. The Group welcomed this initiative by the Chairmen to take a wider view of the implications of possible civil action; and the intention of the Chairmen to inform the Government through the appropriate sponsoring Minister if at any time it was intended that such action should be taken.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office
27 June 1984