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The British Independent Steel Producers Association

5 Cromwell Road · London SW7 2HX

Telephone: 01-581 0231

Telegrams: Bispalon London SW7
Telex: 262134

2nd February, 1980.

The Prime Minister,
10 Downing Street,
London, SW1.

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Dear Prime Minister.

Private Sector Steel Strike

You will know that strike action in the private sector of the steel industry has once again been ordered by the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation - on this occasion within three hours of the House of Lords judgement. This is despite that fact that there is no dispute between the union and these Companies.

Last Saturday (26th January) injunctions were obtained in the Court of Appeal against the first strike and other disruptive actions ordered by the union against private steel Companies. Generally work people indicated their willingness to come to work normally last Sunday, but union officials would not allow this on the grounds that the Orders of the Court had to be confirmed by the union's Executive Council.

Last Tuesday's Executive Council fell in with the Court Order and sent instructions to their branches by post. In most private sector works the news transmitted by the media was considered sufficient for a willing return to work, but in other areas union officials prevailed on their members to await the post!

We could at any time last week have pursued those named in the injunction for contempt of Court but considered that this was unlikely to aid the practical outcome we sought, namely an early return to work.

After the House of Lords decision yesterday, made for precise reasons we shall not know for some weeks, our employees are now torn between union instructions to strike and their knowledge that some of their Companies and so their own jobs are in real jeopardy if they strike again. They know the effects of the last fortnight of intermittent strikes and other industrial action. They also know first hand the poor overall steel market situation. They may well doubt, as we do, the concern for their plight of a union Executive Council which comprises seventeen British Steel Corporation employees and only four private sector representatives.

We have explored legal remedies to the limit and found them wanting. We are bound to wonder why the House of Lords Judicial Committee deemed it necessary so quickly to assemble on an exceptional day to consider the minutiae of the law in this case. A pause for reflection after the Court of Appeal's decision would have assisted all those concerned with real industrial problems. We shall not for some time know whether there is any element in the Law Lords' judgements which offers hope for our employers and employees.

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The Prime Minister.

2nd February, 1980.

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You will know that we met the Secretary of State for Employment on 16th January. At that time secondary picketing was the principal problem affecting private steel Companies. We suggested to him at least the urgent enactment of Clause 14 of the Employment Bill even though this would only make secondary picketing actionable at the victims hazard in the courts. We also indicated that urgent implementation of the Government's intention to deal with all secondary action was imperative. Mr. Prior rejected our suggestion because of the Government's more gradualist approach to industrial relations legislation. We expressed our dissatisfaction, but you yourself subsequently confirmed this policy in the House.

Last May your Government undertook to reform the law relating to all secondary industrial action. We have unsuccessfully sought protection in the Courts in our own case, but the Government has done nothing but announce (on the eve of the Lords' hearing) a broad intention to act soon.

We support the general policy that your Government is adopting towards the British Steel Corporation. We feel let down that you have not yet acted - as is in your power - to support by legislation private self-sufficient Companies who are vulnerable under present law to the side effects of this policy.

We urge you to take immediate steps to enact firm legislation to outlaw any form of secondary industrial action. We would welcome an urgent meeting with you to tell you further of the immediate difficulties we face and to discuss the whole question with you.

In view of the urgent public concern endorsed by their Lordships I am releasing this letter to the press.

Yours sincerely,

A. Mortimer.

Home (445-5355)

(The Stafford Hotel).