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MISC 101(84) 9th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 11 APRIL 1984 at 9.45 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 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 Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

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

SECRETARIAT

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

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

SECRET

AND PERSONAL

30

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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 46 pits were working normally that day and, overall, several hundred more miners had reported for work than on the previous day. The major impediment to an improvement on the previous day's increase in the amount of coal moved by rail was a particular signal-box at Worksop, efforts were in hand to overcome the problem. Power station endurance in England and Wales was bearing up well because oil burn was increasing as planned and some coal was still being delivered to a number of stations. There was no immediate likelihood of pithead storage space running out at pits still working and with summer approaching there should be no serious problems with domestic coal supplies.

The President of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was thought to be bringing great pressure to bear on moderate members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) to ensure there would be no decision in favour of a national strike ballot at the NEC meeting on 12 April. It had been reported that some 150 coach-loads of miners from South Wales were likely to be outside the NUM HQ in Sheffield when the NEC meet on 12 April, and it was to be expected a large number of militant miners from Yorkshire and other coalfields would also be present, providing a clear threat to law and order and possibly preventing moderate members of the NEC from entering the building. The most likely outcome of that meeting now appeared to be the convening of a further National Delegate Conference with a view to re-affirming NUM policy on pit closures and an inadequate pay offer. Militant members of the NUM would find it easier to impose their will at a National Delegate Conference. Allegations that privatisation of the coal industry would follow the closure of uneconomic pits might figure more prominently in the left wing propaganda campaign in the future.

SECRET

The result of the ballot recently carried out by members of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) on whether to strike on the issue of pit closures was expected later in the day; present indications were that there would be a narrow majority against strike action.

There was a meeting scheduled for later in the day at which employers in the electricity supply industry were hoping to reach a settlement on pay for their manual workers. If it was not possible to get a settlement at that day's meeting the employers would endeavour to adjourn the meeting until the following week.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there had been little heavy picketing overnight except at Bolsover Colliery where 86 per cent of the workforce had entered the pit despite the presence of 400 pickets. The police would pay particular attention to the NUM HQ in Sheffield on 12 April. It would not be practicable to prevent militant miners assembling for what would be presented as a demonstration rather than a picket, but the police would do their best to contain the demonstration. Particular efforts would need to be devoted, if necessary, to assisting moderate members of the NEC to enter the building for the meeting.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that on the previous day 55 coal trains had been scheduled of which 37 ran and 18 were prevented from running by members of the rail unions.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that there were no immediate problems facing industry. The NUM appeared to have agreed, following considerable pressure from unions in the steel industry, that coal and coke supplies should be made available to the main steel foundries. Steel production should therefore be maintained at a reasonable level until the end of the following week, after which it might decline. Road deliveries of coal seemed likely to meet the foreseeable needs of small individual industrial users. Problems might arise next month for larger industrial users - particularly paper and cement manufacturers and, depending on the level of steel output, firms such as Massey-Ferguson and British Leyland. The NCB

SECRET

were hopeful that supply problems could be overcome. Pressure on the NUM from union members in threatened industries, on the lines of that exerted by the steel unions, could prove helpful.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND said that power station endurance in Scotland had been slightly but only temporarily affected by difficulties involving 24 hour loss of output from a nuclear reactor and a cable fault at another station. Two coal trains were currently running each day to Ravenscraig, as agreed by the NUM a few days earlier.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that renewed interest in the part employment legislation might play in relation to the miners strike was likely later in the week. Two small coke handling firms were seeking injunctions against the NUM to prevent secondary pickets depriving them of business and to secure compensation for business already lost and the case had been adjourned until 13 April. Depending on the outcome it was possible that other private sector businessmen affected by the miners action might also seek injunctions. The General Secretary of the NUM had appealed to other unions to make funds available to the miners despite the relative wealth of the NUM and the fact that the NUM was not providing strike pay. The Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers had donated only £3,000.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a short discussion, said that the Government policy of avoiding any action or statement that could assist the President of the NUM, especially in relation to the chances of obtaining a national ballot of NUM members, should continue for the time being. It was possible that Mr Scargill intended the current situation to continue throughout the summer, prior to seeking to call a national strike in the autumn and for this reason the successful completion of the phased introduction of maximum oil burn and movement of the greatest possible tonnage of coal from working pits to power stations remained of paramount importance. It was hoped that pressure from union members in industries whose future was threatened by loss of coal supplies, together with the ingenuity of managers in those industries in cooperation with the NCB, would overcome the supply

SECRET

AND PERSONAL

problems that had been mentioned. In this connection the steel unions had given a good lead. The longer the current action continued the more likely it would be that financial pressures now more severe than those applying in 1972 and 1974, would be felt by miners and their families. There might then be a drift back to work in a number of coalfields currently closed down, although such developments were unlikely in Yorkshire. In the event of a prolonged strike, the handling of pit closures would need careful consideration. The Group would meet again Friday 13 April when there would be a first opportunity to assess the outcome of the NUM NEC meeting on 12 April.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

11 April 1984

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