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MISC 101(84) 17th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 30 MAY 1984 at 4.30 pm

SECRET

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

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 Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

Mr David Mellor MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Home Office

Mr John Butcher
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State, Department of Trade
and Industry

SECRET

SECRETARIAT

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 received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that, because of holidays, only 11 pits were working fully that day. This was equivalent in normal circumstances to 45 pits fully working. Two pits at one colliery in Lancashire were newly producing some coal. Despite reduced production due to the holiday, it was hoped to move that week 60 per cent of the amount of coal moved in the previous week: some coal was being taken from stock and open cast operations continued to contribute.

The violence of the previous day had been repeated that afternoon at the British Steel Corporation's (BSC's) coking works at Orgreave. That morning had been comparatively quiet in spite of the arrest of Mr Scargill, who had been released on unconditional bail until 10 July charged with obstruction. Coke was not being made at Orgreave and would eventually run out there. Stocks were 16,000 tonnes and weekly consumption at Scunthorpe 6,000 tonnes. Arrangements had been made for Scunthorpe to be supplied from imports when the Orgreave stocks ran out. This would no doubt require a further major police operation. The cessation of coke movements from Orgreave would require very careful presentation, given the importance placed on picketing there by Mr Scargill as a trial of strength. He would discuss handling with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Chairman of BSC.

Further talks had been arranged to take place in confidence shortly between the National Coal Board (NCB) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Mr Scargill, Mr McGahey and Mr Heathfield would attend for the union: the Board would be represented by senior officers but not by Mr MacGregor, who took the view that it would be preferable from a tactical point of view not to take part at this stage. The NCB had in hand contingency plans to contact each miner directly should it seem appropriate to do so in the light of events at the talks.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE, HOME OFFICE said that picketing at Orgreave had not come near to halting supplies from the depot in spite its violence. Workers at the plant had continued to go in. Though the use by police on the previous day of dogs, horses and riot gear had not been resorted

to lightly, the police were confident that they could continue to cope. They would clearly be disturbed if any cessation of supplies from Orgreave should appear to be due to the success of violent tactics pursued there by the pickets.

That morning, 30 miners had entered Hobart House, the London Headquarters of the NCB, and occupied part of the Industrial Relations Section. The hand of a Commissionaire had been cut during their entry. They had gained possession of some papers, but these had apparently been no more than a position report which would have been released to the press later in the day in any event. The NCB had confirmed that there had been no access to sensitive papers. Police assistance had not been requested, though some arrests took place outside, where a number of supporters had gathered, after the intruders left the building at noon.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the settlement of the railwaymen pay negotiations had been welcome in spite of misleading suggestions in the media that the British Rail Board had given way on productivity requirements. The railways were able to move any coal offered.

In discussion the following were the main points made.

- a. In the light of recent events, particularly at Orgreave, the time might be right for civil action to be taken against the NUM in the courts. The picketing at Orgreave was plainly secondary and in breach of the Code of Practice, to which the TUC had agreed, under the Employment Act 1980. There was good reason to expect that civil action could be successful and that it could be made to bite effectively on the union's assets if a court judgement was not complied with. On the other hand, it was argued that civil action in the courts was not bound to succeed and was subject to difficulties of proof. Even if successful, it was unlikely to ease circumstances such as those at Orgreave, where clear branches of the criminal law were taking place and the problem was principally one of enforcement. In any event, recourse to civil action in the courts was in the first instance a matter for the judgement of management in the industries affected.

- b. The holding of discussions between the NCB and NUM was being taken as an indication that the strike might soon be settled and that the Board were prepared to move. While strikers continued to have this impression, any drift back to work would be arrested. There was therefore likely to be little advantage to the NCB in seeking artificially to prevent the breakdown of talks if, as seemed likely, they failed to establish a basis for a settlement acceptable to both sides.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Secretary of State for Energy would discuss with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Chairman of the BSC the handling of the eventual cessation of coke movements from the Orgreave depot. Recent events there, and in particular the increasing extent to which the police had been exposed to violence, were disturbing. She would wish at the earliest possible opportunity to consider the report currently being prepared by the Attorney General, in consultation with the Home Secretary and other Ministers concerned, on the tactical options for dealing with the dispute, including the roles of the civil and criminal law. Meanwhile, it was important that the confidential discussions which the NCB was having with the NUM should be conducted skilfully and sensitively and that the negotiating brief of the NCB representatives should be clearly delineated. She would convene a meeting later that week of the Ministers chiefly concerned to consider further the prospects for the negotiations and their relationship to the plans of the NCB for handling the dispute in the longer term.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Energy to discuss with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Chairman of BSC the handling of the eventual cessation of movements from the Orgreave depot.

Cabinet Office
31 May 1984