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MISC 101(84) 20th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 18 JUNE 1984 at 4.15 pm

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 Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

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 Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Lord Trefgarne
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
for the Armed Forces, Ministry
of Defence

Mr Michael Ancram MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of
State, Scottish Office

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 received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that deliveries of coal the previous week had continued at levels which were high in the circumstances. Three pits which had been on holiday the previous week had returned to work that morning. One pit which had been producing coal was on maintenance that day. In all, forty-three pits were working normally and a further pit which had been working normally was on holiday. At one pit in Scotland where some miners had returned to work, face workers had reported that morning for the first time and there was the prospect of some production soon.

In addition to the serious violence at Orgreave, there had been heavy and unpleasant picketing that morning at Shirebrook. Both that day's convoys of lorries from Orgreave had got through in spite of the tactics resorted to by pickets in an attempt to stop them.

It was noticeable that once again violent picketing had coincided with the presence of Mr Scargill. It was understood that the injuries which had led to his admission to hospital that day had occurred when he had slipped down a bank.

There were no plans on the part of the National Coal Board (NCB) to proceed with a management ballot. The suggestion that a ballot was being prepared had arisen from a misreported remark of Mr MacGregor's, made in answer to a question at a Press Conference. A letter would, however, be sent by the NCB to all miners on 20 June, and a further letter was planned for the following week.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that he had met the Chairman of the British Steel Corporation (BSC) earlier that day. The intention of BSC was still to suspend coke runs from the Orgreave depot on 22 June. The press release to that effect which had originally been intended for release on the following day had been released a day early at the request of the police. As a result of the day's violence, the depot itself had suffered damage to

pumps and railways, as well as the loss of its gates and other, more superficial damage. BSC staff at the depot had been understandably alarmed. It was not yet entirely clear what statements had been made by the local BSC management, but they had agreed to run the second convoy of the day, after some initial reluctance, when they had received an assurance from the police that it could be got through. It remained the clear public intention of the BSC that coke runs from Orgreave should continue until 22 June.

He had discussed with the Chairman the question of coal supplies to Llanwern and Ravenscraig in the event of the blacking of coal movements threatened by railwaymen's unions from midnight that night. The BSC were confident that they could revert to arrangements to supply Ravenscraig by road, but were in some doubt whether this could be achieved in the case of Llanwern. The Chairman was seriously considering recourse to the civil law. Time for consideration was short: if coal supplies were to cease that night, it would be necessary to bank the furnaces at Llanwern on 20 June. Civil action might take the form of injunctions against the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) over blacking or against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) over picketing. Evidence for either course was available, but the Chairman had in mind that the chances of effective enforcement of an injunction might be better against the rail unions than against the NUM, whose finances were less centralised.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that he had had discussions with representatives of both the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (AMA) and Association of County Councils (ACC) about the arrangements which had been made for an extra contribution from the Exchequer towards the cost of policing the dispute. It was clear that the present arrangement to meet centrally 90 per cent of the costs of policing the dispute in excess of the product of a 1p rate, generous though it was, still left the authorities most severely affected to bear a serious additional burden. He was consulting the Chief Secretary, Treasury on an arrangement which would meet the genuine concern of the authorities most seriously affected while maintaining the principle that some contribution should continue to be made from local sources to the costs of policing the dispute.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT said that the BSC plants at Ravenscraig and Llanwern had received three principal coal trains each on the previous day. British Rail (BR) had reported earlier that day that they did not see current difficulty at Llanwern.

During the previous week, BR had tightened up discipline at their Shirebrook depot. Men refusing to work coal trains had been given time for reflection and, if they persisted, sent home without pay. This tactic had been successful, and BR intended to apply it during the current week at their depots at Coalville and Toton.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

a. It had been widely and inaccurately reported in the media that coke runs from Orgreave had been suspended because of violent picketing there. No doubt BSC would be acting quickly to ensure that this damaging impression was not allowed to stand.

b. The question of recourse to the civil law was one for management in the industries affected by the dispute. Action against the NUR and ASLEF might have attractions for BSC from the point of view of effective enforcement. It could no doubt also be argued in favour of action against the rail unions and not against the NUM that the threat of action by railwaymen was a more immediate and serious threat to the Corporation's commercial interests than NUM picketing. On the other hand, taking action against the rail unions but not against the NUM in spite of the tactics which NUM members were pursuing on picket lines at BSC premises might be difficult to justify to public opinion and might seem an acknowledgement that violence could be indulged in with impunity. The BSC would no doubt give appropriate weight to the likelihood that, if they sought an injunction against the rail unions, movements of coal by train in the Midlands would be brought to a halt.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Group had noted the consultations which were taking place between the Home Secretary and Chief Secretary, Treasury on arrangements for contributions from the Exchequer

to the cost of policing the dispute. They should report the outcome to the Group. It was to be hoped, following the serious turn of events at Orgreave that morning, that the BSC would take prompt action with the media to put the record straight on their intentions regarding movements of coke from the depot. This was most important if it was to be made clear that the violent tactics of the pickets had not succeeded. The Group should meet again later that week to discuss developments on picketing at Orgreave and elsewhere and the extent of any response by the railwaymen to union calls for the blacking of coal movements to steel works.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Home Secretary to report to the Group the outcome of his consultations with the Chief Secretary, Treasury on arrangements for Exchequer contributions towards the cost of policing the dispute.

Cabinet Office

19 June 1984