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MISC 101(84) 23rd Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 2 JULY 1984 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Leon Brittan QC MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

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 Nicholas Edwards MP
Secretary of State for Wales

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Lord Gray of Contin
Minister of State, Scottish Office

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

SECRETARIAT

Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

SECRET AND PERSONAL

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that pits which were working normally numbered 34, with 10 on holiday; those producing some coal numbered 6, with 3 on holiday, and those with some workers in numbered 4 with 1 on holiday. Pits on holiday included Bilston Glen. The only significant change was at Warsop in Derbyshire, where 44 men had gone in that morning compared with 23 the previous week and where coal was expected to be produced for the first time during the dispute on 3 or 4 July.

Movements of coal had started poorly the previous week, but, with the exception of movements to steel works at Ravenscraig and Llanwern, had improved towards the end of the week. That morning's movements were considerably better than the previous Monday's. Movements of coal to power stations had totalled 430,000 tonnes during the previous week and about 300,000 tonnes of power station stocks had been drawn down.

There were 55 pits where the condition of faces was causing anxiety. Among these, there were 4 or 5 cases where it was likely that faces would be lost.

The Steel Committee of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) that morning had rebuffed a request from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for support for their demand for a halt to steel production in excess of levels needed to maintain plant intact.

He understood from the Chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB) that the Board had now obtained improved, independent professional advice on publicity. They would be placing advertisements drawing on this new advice in the course of the week. He understood, too, that a letter to NCB employees would be going out in the course of the week from local colliery managers. This would take the form of a framework of standard paragraphs, with additional passages to be added by colliery managers to reflect local circumstances.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there had been no dramatic developments affecting public order that day. He was considering how best to deal with attempts by certain Labour-controlled police authorities to use their financial powers in a way calculated to restrict the freedom of Chief Constables to take operational decisions necessary for policing the dispute effectively.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) were organising large scale road deliveries of coal, coke and ore to Ravenscraig and Llanwern. At Llanwern only 1 blast furnace was operating albeit at planned levels, reducing output from the plant as a whole to approximately half the planned total. Planned production was being maintained at the other major steelworks. There were still no reports of any more general problems for supplies of coal to industry.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that problems which had arisen during the previous week with movements of coal by rail were easing progressively. This was so particularly at the British Rail (BR) depots at Shirebrook and Coalville. He understood that the Chairman of BR hoped for a further marked improvement following the conclusion on 4 July of the Annual Conference of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), including possibly the resumption of rail deliveries to the steel works at Llanwern.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES said that a Director of BSC had said publicly before the weekend that Llanwern had been making better steel more cheaply with imported than with Welsh coal; and had made it clear that the Welsh coal field needed Llanwern more than Llanwern needed Welsh coal. He believed that this statement had had a salutary effect on opinion among miners at the Gwent pits.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that efforts should continue to maximise production and deliveries of coal. Both the continuing recovery in rail deliveries following recent reverses and the prospect of renewed production at a further pit were encouraging. The rebuff that morning to the NUM from the TUC Steel Committee carried the clear message to strikers that, in spite of repeated attempts to enlist support from other unions, they were very largely on their own. The Group welcomed the news that the NCB had

secured further professional advice on publicity and that it would be pressing its efforts in that field more vigorously. They hoped that the Board would use all available means of giving those striking miners who wished to return to work the support and confidence necessary to induce them to do so. It was to be hoped that the planned further letter from colliery managers to individual miners would help in this.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

3 July 1984