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MISC 101(84) 24th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 4 JULY 1984 at NOON

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 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 Nicholas Edwards MP
Secretary of State for Wales

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 Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

The Rt Hon Lord Gray of Contin
Minister 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 pits fully working numbered 35 with a further 10 on holiday; those working partially numbered 5 with a further 3 on holiday; and pits with some workers in numbered 5 with a further 1 on holiday. The only change represented by these figures was 1 pit in Scotland where one man had returned to work.

Coal movements for the previous day had been good: British Rail (BR) had been able to provide all the rail transport needed for movements except for those to the steelworks at Llanwern and Ravenscraig. Rail movements had included 3 trains from Coalville depot, from where a further 5 were expected to be run that day.

Further talks had been arranged to take place the following day between the National Coal Board (NCB) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) at a secret location. A statement issued by the NCB on the previous evening had made it clear that the talks were to be continued on the basis identified at earlier discussions in Edinburgh, which had centred on the definition of exhausted and uneconomic pits. Mr Scargill, on the other hand, had said that withdrawal of the NCB's plans for pit closures was a precondition for progress with talks. The prospects for the talks were hard to assess: perhaps the most likely outcome was that Mr Scargill would seek to break them off in a way which was calculated to maintain support for his policies at the NUM Delegate Conference in the following week.

It was intended that coal movements to (but not yet coke movements from) the Orgreave depot would begin again on the following Monday.

It had been reported that the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) intended to fine their members involved in movements of ore and coal to steel works by road for crossing picket lines. Past experience with the union's attempts to enforce discipline by similar means suggested that any fines imposed would be virtually unenforceable in practice.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there were few developments to report affecting public order. Heavy picketing was reported that morning at a power station in Humberside. Increased levels of picketing were reported also at Warsop colliery where men had been returning to work in increasing numbers. Picketing at both places had been contained by the police.

The South Yorkshire police authority had purported to instruct the Chief Constable not to incur without their express consent any expenditure on items involved in policing the dispute other than police manpower. This would, for example, prevent the Chief Constable from incurring expenditure on accommodation for police from other forces provided through the mutual aid arrangements in connection with the resumption of movements to Orgreave planned for the following Monday. The police authority had threatened the Chief Constable with suspension if this instruction were not obeyed. The implications were potentially very serious; if the instruction were complied with, it would be copied by other police authorities under political control sympathetic to the strike leadership. He had told the Chief Constable of South Yorkshire that he would be indemnified by the Government for a short interim period while the Attorney General took action in the Courts.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that he and the Home Secretary had agreed that action in the Courts should be taken by him rather than by the Chief Constable, having regard to the Government's central responsibilities for the maintenance of public order. Leave would be sought from the Courts that afternoon or early the following morning to apply for a judicial review of the decision of the police authority. At that hearing, an injunction would also be sought to prevent the police authority from suspending the Chief Constable for any improper reason. He hoped that the case itself would be heard early in the following week: he would argue that the decision of the police authority should be overturned by the Court on the grounds that it had not been reached reasonably. He was confident that the application would succeed.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT said that 35 coal trains had run on the previous day and a similar number were expected to run that day. There had been no rail movements to Ravenscraig during the week, but 120,000 tonnes of coal and 70,000 tonnes of iron ore

had been unloaded at Hunterston by dockers who were members of the TGWU. Similarly, there had been no rail movements to Llanwern that week. Management was writing to the BR crews involved setting out the implications of a threat to the continued existence of the steelworks for railmen's jobs.

At the Coalville depot there was some hope of an increase in the next few days in numbers of trains running in spite of the fact that the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) were paying in full the wages of men who were sent home.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that no trains had run to the British Steel Corporation's (BSC) plant at Scunthorpe on the previous day because of picketing by the NUM. A meeting of dockers at Immingham had failed to decide conclusively whether or not to black unloading of further supplies destined for Scunthorpe. For the time being, some unloading was continuing. Movements through the Trent wharves had continued at high levels. Despite the interruption of rail movements to Ravenscraig and Llanwern, they had received substantial amounts of coal and ore by road on the previous day.

He had met members of the Board of BSC on the previous day. It was clear that they were in good heart and determined to continue production as close as possible to normal levels. The Corporation would be taking action to correct any impression which might have arisen from remarks made by the Chief Executive that BSC considered that the practical value of the recent operation to maintain deliveries of coke from the Orgreave depot may not have been great. It was clear to him that the recent discussions which had taken place between the Chairman of BSC and the Chairmen of the other nationalised industries affected by the strike had been helpful to all the parties.

It would be necessary before the Summer Recess to have a Parliamentary Debate on a proposal to increase the statutory limit on BSC borrowing. The need for a Debate was untimely and it would need careful handling.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES said that 2 ore ships were unloading or about to unload at Port Talbot. It had been possible to begin movements of iron ore to Llanwern by road that day, however, only after the provision of police reinforcements. He understood that the plant might in consequence receive only 2 convoys that day, rather than 3. For the longer term, a daily rate of 3 convoys of iron ore was essential for the maintenance of production levels.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it was most important that police authorities should not succeed in taking, purportedly on financial grounds, actions calculated to interfere with the operational judgement of Chief Constables in policing the dispute. The Group had taken note of the action put in hand by the Home Secretary and Attorney General, who should continue to report developments. The prospects for the revived talks between the NCB and NUM were hard to assess. If they broke down in the course of the first session, it was to be hoped that the NCB, drawing on its new sources of professional advice on publicity, would be able promptly and persuasively to make a strong public case laying the blame for breakdown at the door of Mr Scargill and his intransigence in insisting that the NCB should abandon their main negotiating objective as a prerequisite for serious discussions. It was most important that the basis of any agreement between the NCB and NUM hinging on the definition of exhausted and uneconomic pits should be absolutely clear and should not be capable either of any general misrepresentation by the strike leadership or of being circumvented in discussions at local level on pit closures.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Home Secretary and Attorney General to report further in due course the action they had set in hand regarding the South Yorkshire Police Authority.

Cabinet Office

5 July 1984