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MISC 101(84) 25th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 9 JULY 1984 at 4.30 pm

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 Nicholas Edwards MP
Secretary of State for Wales

The Rt Hon Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Mr Norman Lamont MP
Minister of State,
Department of Trade and Industry

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

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 John Stanley MP
Minister of State for the Armed Forces,
Ministry of Defence

Mr Allan Stewart MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State,
Scottish Office

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
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 he understood that recent talks between the National Coal Board (NCB) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had centred on a definition of exhaustion which would allow uneconomic pits to be closed by agreement. The NCB was arguing for a definition extending to pits which were found, on engineering inspection, to be unable with or without further investment to yield beneficial production of coal. A definition on these lines was clearly inconsistent with Mr Scargill's declared public position and he had resisted it. Full reports were not yet available following the conclusion of the latest session, but the parties had agreed that talks should resume on 18 July.

The initiative by NCB management in Northumberland and Durham to provide transport into pits for miners wishing to work had stimulated heavier picketing. Neither any serious incident nor any significant return to work had been reported. The Board would continue to make buses available in these areas for the rest of the week, at least.

Pits fully working that day numbered 37, with a further 8 on holiday; those producing some coal numbered 7 with a further 2 on holiday; those with some men in numbered 3 with a further 1 on holiday. This represented an increase of 1 in the number of pits producing some coal: the pit was Warsop, where coal had been produced that day for the first time.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the Attorney General's application for judicial review of purported action by the South Yorkshire Police Authority to restrict the authority of the Chief Constable to incur certain expenditure on policing the strike had been heard on the previous Friday. The case had been adjourned: in the meantime, the Court had required the purported action by the authority to be suspended. Both he and the Attorney General were fully satisfied with this outcome, which had achieved all their immediate aims. The South Yorkshire Police Authority was meeting on the following day.

No significant trouble had been reported from Orgreave, where inward movements of coal had resumed that morning. Pickets, though present in large numbers, had arrived for the most part only after the lorry convoy had arrived at the plant. 40 miners had arrived for work that morning at Ellington colliery in Northumberland, but 37 had declined to cross picket lines to go into the pit. 3 who had done so had later been persuaded to come out again.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that levels of movement by rail that day and on the previous Friday had been fairly satisfactory by the standards of recent days. Some problems continued with the operation of signal boxes in Nottinghamshire. There were still no rail deliveries to the steel works at Llanwern and Ravenscraig.

It had just been reported that a national dock strike from midnight that night had been called in both scheme and non-scheme ports by the national docks committee of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The reason given for the strike call was the loading at Immingham by the British Steel Corporation (BSC) of iron ore onto lorries bound for Scunthorpe. The TGWU were understood to claim that this loading constituted a breach of the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS), although the BSC believed that this was not the case. The port employers intended to issue a statement pointing out that the National and Local Dock Labour Boards existed to deal with disagreements of this kind. It remained to be seen what the response would be to the strike call: an earlier call for a one-day strike at Immingham itself had been carried only by the comparatively narrow margin of 280:240.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that stocks of iron ore at Scunthorpe were sufficient for 10 weeks. The BSC continued to maintain planned production of steel there and at its other works.

It was reported that the Alcan aluminium smelter at Lynemouth could be faced with difficulties in 6-7 weeks time, in anticipation of which the firm had opened negotiations with the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) about the possible purchase of energy from the National Grid.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES reported that a second blast furnace was again in operation at Llanwern. Further reports were awaited on the cause of the fire which had taken place at the weekend at the premises of Hazell's Haulage, a haulier involved in road deliveries to Llanwern.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

a. It was possible that agreement on a definition of exhausted or unworkable pits on the lines indicated by the Secretary of State for Energy would be helpful in some respects. It would be a clear departure from the line taken by Mr Scargill and would not fundamentally affect either the NCB's powers to close pits or the local procedures for implementing closures. On the other hand, if a definition were agreed which was not clear cut in respect of crucial matters such as investment and commercial viability, the way might be open, first, for the strike leadership to claim at least a partial victory for the strike; and secondly, for the NUM to seek to apply an unduly restrictive interpretation of the definition in local closure procedures while claiming that any broader interpretation advanced by the NCB was evidence of bad faith.

b. There were some indications that Mr Scargill was already exploiting the adjournment of talks that afternoon to tactical and presentational advantage in advance of the meetings later in the week of the National Executive and Delegate Conference of the NUM. It was possible that he might see the prolongation of talks, not as a serious effort to come to agreement, but as a means of averting the increased pressure for a return to work which might ensue if the talks were to terminate.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it was not apparent what tactical considerations had led the NCB to agree to an adjournment extending as far ahead as 18 July, but they were no doubt formulating their strategy for 18 July and thereafter, subject to modification in the light of events at the Delegate Conference of the NUM later that week. In the event that talks eventually resumed with some genuine hope of progress, the NCB would no doubt wish to start from a clear assessment of what features would be acceptable and what unacceptable in any agreed definition of exhausted or

unworkable pits; and of the implications of any such definition for their ability to achieve planned reductions of capacity to an acceptable timetable. In the event that the talks resumed in circumstances which made an early breakdown likely, the NCB would presumably wish to have plans in readiness for measures both to promote and to facilitate a return to work on a larger scale than previously. In either event, it would be desirable for the Board to have ready contingency plans for handling the media following the conclusion of talks which allowed them to put their points of view across clearly and persuasively both to miners and to the general public, and which did not, as in the past, allow the initiative to be acquired by the strike leadership. The Secretary of State for Energy should report the current thinking of the NCB on these matters to the next meeting of the Group. In the meantime, it was to be hoped that the NCB would continue with its programme of press advertisements, which had had a favourable effect on public opinion towards their case. Ministers should be prepared to add this weight to the arguments being put forward by the Board where that appeared to be desirable in the interests of balanced and truthful reporting of the dispute.

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 report to the next Meeting of the Group on the matters indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.

Cabinet Office

10 July 1984