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MISC 101(84) 32nd Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 8 AUGUST 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 Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

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 Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for
Transport

Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP
Solicitor General

Mr John Moore MP
Financial Secretary, Treasury

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

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr P L Gregson
Mr J F Stoker

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

SECRET

AND PERSONAL

106

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INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group considered a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that 120,000 tonnes of coal had been moved on the previous day. This was a good figure for the number of pits working. Difficulties on the railways continued, though the 20 principal coal trains run on the previous day were an improvement on the day before. Road movements of coal had grown considerably over recent weeks.

There were some indications of a rift between the Scottish and National leaderships of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Meetings on 10 August of the National Executive and of a Delegate Conference of the NUM might give further indications of the mood of miners from different areas.

He planned to make a speech on the evening of 10 August. Among other things, he intended to raise the question of the attitude of the Trade Union movement in general to the recent attacks on the National Coal Board (NCB) and other property.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the concerted attacks which had taken place on property, deplorable though they were, might reflect dissatisfaction with the limited success of the strikers' earlier tactics of mass picketing and personal intimidation in spreading and maintaining the strike. They might also suggest a lack of manpower for further widespread mass picketing. The general effect had been to damage the strikers' cause. It was clear that the attacks were organised. The Chairman of the Association of Chief Police Officers was in Derbyshire in connection with investigations which had been set in hand. Chief Constables from the areas affected would meet on the following day to discuss how to improve preventive and detective measures and the co-ordination of the police forces concerned.

The Stipendiary Magistrates who had been appointed would sit shortly. The police were being encouraged to give serious non-indictable offences priority for prosecution.

SECRET

He would make a speech in Scotland on 11 August. To the extent that he could properly do so, he would stress the seriousness of the offences committed during the week and the extent of the penalties available to the courts.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that trouble which continued at British Rail's (BR's) Westhouses Depot was nominally due to plans which BR had to close the depot and transfer the men there elsewhere. BR hoped by careful handling to improve the numbers of trains run from the depot.

More generally, the situation on the railways had worsened. The rail unions were threatening a one-day strike on 12 September, and withdrawal of co-operation - effectively a work-to-rule - from 10 September. The unions claimed that this action had been called because of anxiety about levels of investment, although the recent record on investment was, in fact, good. The true motive of the unions was probably a wish to help the NUM while at the same time exploiting difficulties caused by the miners' strike to their own advantage. BR would be trying hard between now and early September to demonstrate publicly the lack of any justification for industrial action.

In the docks, a problem had arisen at Hunterston, where the British Steel Corporation (BSC) wished to dock the bulk carrier "Ostia". The ship was carrying a cargo of coal for Ravenscraig and had been blacked by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). There was a feeling in the industry that the TGWU might seek, at a time of their choosing, to find a further purported breach of the National Dock Labour Scheme as an excuse for a further dock strike, but it was thought unlikely for tactical reasons that they would wish to do so before the end of August.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that two trains had run that day from Immingham to Scunthorpe. It was clear that this was an isolated event and not a sustainable resumption of rail traffic. At Ravenscraig, men involved in a minor dispute within the plant were now back at work.

At Hunterston, the blacking of the "Ostia" by dock workers appeared to be due to a desire to support the striking miners. Unless the cargo of the "Ostia" was made available, it would be necessary for the BSC to bank, and eventually

to close down, the furnaces at Ravenscraig. In principle, banking might become necessary on 12 August, though it was probably that BSC could find ways of delaying it for some days further. If Ravenscraig were to close, it was not certain that it would reopen.

In talks which had adjourned that afternoon, TGWU representatives had offered to permit a resumption of rail supplies to Ravenscraig at levels lower than the current throughput of the plant. This offer, which BSC regarded as inadequate, would be discussed on the following day by representatives of the TGWU, the rail unions and the NUM. Talks between the unions and BSC would resume on 10 August. If no agreement satisfactory to BSC was reached then, the Corporation proposed to take the question to the local Dock Labour Board, and thereafter to the National Dock Labour Board, if possible by the beginning of the following week. If the Boards decided in favour of BSC, or if members were equally divided, the Corporation proposed to bring the "Ostia" in, having in the meantime publicly established their entitlement to do so by strenuous action through the media. If the ship was brought in without TGWU agreement, the crew would remove the hatches at sea, which was a normal procedure. The ship would dock without the help of TGWU tugmen and boatmen and would be unloaded by members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC), who had been firm in their support for the BSC. The only part normally played by TGWU members in unloading was "trimming" the cargo in the holds to bring it all within the reach of the grabs: this would be left undone, leaving a small amount of coal on board the ship.

It was possible, though by no means certain, that action on these lines by the BSC would be followed by a call for a renewed national dock strike. The alternative, however, would be either to surrender to the TGWU blacking, with potentially very grave implications for Ravenscraig; or to take action in the courts against the TGWU over the blacking.

In discussion, the following were the main points made -

- a. A further national dock strike would be most unwelcome. On the other hand, the TGWU might well not think that the position at Hunterston offered a promising basis for one. The effects on Ravenscraig would

bring them into serious confrontation with the ISTC and with many of their own members who relied for their livelihood directly or indirectly on the Ravenscraig works. It was clear that the TGWU were themselves in breach of the National Dock Labour Scheme in blacking the "Ostia", while the BSC were confident that they were entitled to dock and unload the ship. Moreover, if it was the intention of the TGWU to precipitate a dock strike, they would probably have little difficulty in finding an excuse to do so, and not necessarily at Hunterston. Although it was possible, it was thus perhaps not probable that a national dock strike would result from proceeding with the unloading of the "Ostia" in the way now being considered by the BSC.

b. The BSC were clearly right in attaching great importance to careful public presentation of their case before bringing in the "Ostia". It would obviously be important to make it clear that any industrial action which might follow in the docks, and any consequences for Ravenscraig, were the result of unreasonable action by the TGWU, and not of provocation by the Corporation.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Group had noted that the British Rail Board would be exerting themselves between now and September to demonstrate the lack of any justification for the industrial action threatened on the railways. The violent, and apparently co-ordinated, attacks on property which had taken place that week were a most serious development: all available means should be used to prevent such attacks and to prosecute those responsible where they did occur. Ministers should continue in their public statements to deplore violence and, where appropriate, to press the strike leadership and their supporters in the trade unions and elsewhere to repudiate it. The Group had noted the circumstances in which the BSC would wish to dock and unload the "Ostia" at Hunterston without TGWU labour. The Corporation was clearly right both in planning to do so only after the procedures available under the National Dock Labour Scheme had been scrupulously followed; and after their case had been presented publicly with great care so as to make it clear that they were reacting in a measured and fully justified way to provocation by the TGWU. The Group

strongly hoped that the closure of Ravenscraig could be avoided. No doubt the Corporation would ensure that steelworkers and public opinion, particularly in Scotland, were aware of the potentially grave consequences for Ravenscraig if the "Ostia"'s cargo was not delivered. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry should arrange for the position to be kept under consideration, in consultation with the Secretaries of State for Transport, Energy and Employment; and for further significant developments to be reported to the Group.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, in consultation with the Secretaries of State for Transport, Energy and Employment, to arrange for the position at Hunterston to be kept under consideration; and for further significant developments to be reported to the Group.

Cabinet Office

9 August 1984