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MISC 101(84) 35th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
THURSDAY 30 AUGUST 1984 at 11.30 am

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 Michael Heseltine MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Nicholas Edwards MP  
Secretary of State for Wales

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 Sir Michael Havers QC MP  
Attorney General

Mr Barney Hayhoe MP  
Minister of State, Treasury

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

The Rt Hon Paul Channon MP  
Minister of State, Department of Trade  
and Industry (Minister for Trade)

Mr Giles Shaw MP  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of  
State, Department of Energy

SECRETARIAT

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

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## 1. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that pits working normally numbered 35, with a further 10 on holiday; those turning some coal numbered 8, with a further 1 on holiday; those with some men in numbered 12 (including one additional pit in North Derbyshire); and those not working numbered 107. The return to work continued, as before, on a small scale. Numbers of men working at Bilston Glen had further increased to 133. Record attendances since the strike began had been reported again that day in North Derbyshire.

Large assemblies of strikers had been reported that day outside pits in Scotland, the North East and Yorkshire. The numbers involved across the country suggested that the activists on whom the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) could call numbered about 10,000 in total, of whom about 3000 might be available at any one time. Mr Scargill had called that morning for mass picketing on 3 September at every pit, coking plant and National Coal Board (NCB) workshop. This was apparently an attempt to forestall further returns to work while NUM activists were distracted by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Annual Congress. The Chairman of the NCB proposed to send a letter to the TUC before Congress began setting out the true factual background to the present phase of the dispute.

It was hoped that coal movements for the whole of that week would be 480-500,000 tonnes: this was good for a week including a Bank Holiday.

The Deputy Chairman of the NCB was visiting Polkemmet that day. The Board thought it essential that, if it proved necessary to close the pit, they should have been seen first thoroughly to have explored the possibility of bringing it back into production within a reasonable time and at reasonable cost. It was likely that the NCB would make an announcement soon about prospects for the pit. Its future, and that of the steel works at Ravenscraig, with which it was closely linked, were of great social and political importance locally: reports suggested that safety cover at the pit had been withdrawn only at the insistence of the national leadership of the NUM in the face of opposition by the Scottish leadership.



The NCB had continued to meet a substantial proportion of the current demand for coal for industrial purposes. Institutions and industrial firms which relied on coal and coal products for space heating would meet difficulties, however, when they came to order winter supplies in September, and would experience shortages when the weather turned in October or November. Domestic consumers might also experience difficulty. It had not been possible for the NCB to keep up deliveries to the trade, who had managed to meet a high proportion of current demand during the summer only through reliance on imports. Imported coal of the appropriate quality was expensive, however, and it had not been feasible for dealers to build up winter stocks from this source.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that, in spite of strikers who continued to assemble in large numbers outside pits in some areas, the police had continued to secure access for miners wishing to return to work. The size of such assemblies in Nottinghamshire had reduced in recent days, apparently owing to the need for activists in Yorkshire to turn their attention to pits there, where men had begun to return.

Two stipendiary magistrates would sit for the first time on 3 September. He was considering ways in which further magistrates' courts could be encouraged to use the services of stipendiaries.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that, at the TUC Congress on 3 September, the NUM would be pressing their motion calling for total support to the strike. It was thought that they would seek a composite debate including the amendments tabled by the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) calling for picket lines set up by the NUM and others not to be crossed and by the National Union of Seamen calling for materials moved by non-union labour or by the Armed Forces not to be handled. Other amendments which had been tabled calling for a day of action and a 10 pence per week levy on all trade unionists were likely to be debated separately.

He understood that the TUC leadership would try to put to the vote a proposal of its own, which would have primacy over the NUM motion, and which, though it would endorse the principle of support for the miners, would insist on urgent discussions between the NUM and the other unions concerned in each case before any action was taken.



THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Secretary of State for Energy should investigate and report on ways of increasing the supply of coal for space heating in domestic and industrial premises and in institutions. He should establish how the NCB and its subsidiaries intended to allocate available supplies of fuel for space heating to existing customers and to ~~those~~ <sup>those</sup> who normally obtained supplies from elsewhere. He should explore with the Board whether it might be possible, in the circumstances, to bring greater quantities of coal up to an acceptable minimum standard for space heating by simplifying or omitting normal treatment processes. Further possibilities which the Board would not doubt wish to consider would include making continuation of supplies of concessionary coal to "hard cases" dependent on the agreement of the NUM to make fuel supplies available to hospitals and other institutions meriting special treatment. It would also be helpful to establish whether it would be possible or desirable to vary or suspend the provisions of the Clean Air Act 1956 so as to allow wood and other fuels to be more widely used by domestic consumers in substitution for coal and coal products; and whether planning conditions preventing the movement of open cast coal from some sources by road could be removed or suspended. The Group had noted that an announcement by the NCB on the future of Polkemmet was expected soon. It was obviously important that the NCB should succeed in establishing publicly the causes of the present state of the pit. They would wish to make it clear that they had acted responsibly and in accordance with their statutory obligations throughout; and that responsibility for the damage should be laid at the door of the NUM and their decision to withdraw safety cover. The Group were seriously concerned at the slow rate at which offences arising from the dispute were being dealt with in the courts. She would urgently consider with the Ministers mainly concerned ways of accelerating proceedings, whether by the appointment of further stipendiary magistrates or otherwise. The Group would meet again on 4 September, following the discussion of the NUM motion at the TUC Congress on 3 September. It was important that the Government should avoid statements which could be seized upon on 3 September by those wishing to convert the miners' strike into a wider confrontation between trade unions and the Government. After 3 September, Ministers should take whatever steps appeared necessary to ensure that the factual basis of the dispute was clearly understood and reported accurately and in a balanced way.



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 -
  - i. consulting the National Coal Board, to examine and report on possible ways of facilitating the supply of fuel for space heating on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up;
  - ii. consulting the Secretary of State for the Environment, to examine and report on -
    - a. the practicability and desirability of suspending or varying the provisions of the Clean Air Act 1956 for the purposes indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up; and
    - b. whether it would be possible to remove or suspend planning conditions limiting the movement by road of coal from certain open cast sources.



2. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE DOCKS

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that only 33 of the 78 ports in the Dock Labour Scheme were on strike and all non-scheme ports were working. This meant that some 55 per cent of seaborne trade (by weight) was still moving despite ~~50~~<sup>80</sup> per cent of the registered dock workers being on strike. During that morning dockers at Immingham and Grimsby had once again voted, by an overwhelming majority, to resume working. The result of the vote due to be taken at Tilbury was expected during the afternoon. Some confusion remained about the likely course of the strike. It was thought that both Dover and Felixstowe would continue to work normally. What little picketing had so far been seen had proved to be peaceful, light and, due to the strong tradition amongst dock workers of obeying the instructions of pickets, largely effective. It remained to be seen whether this continued to be the case at ports where dockers wished to continue working if flying pickets sought to prevent them. So far there had been very little for the police to do in relation to pickets at the docks.

It remained essential for Government spokesmen to concentrate their comments on the origins of the strike, the lack of any industrial issue affecting dockers, and the falsity of the Transport and General Workers Union Docks Officers' claim that scab labour had been used at Hunterston. They should continue to point out that dockers' (and steelworkers and other union's members') jobs would almost certainly be forfeited in support of striking miners, the vast majority of whom would still have jobs when the disputes were over.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EMPLOYMENT said that, whilst it was unfortunate that the port employers had in their public comments elevated the importance of the vote at Tilbury (which might well be in favour of strike action) and had referred at least once to the strike as an "industrial" dispute, thus giving unnecessary and unwarranted support to the union's case, much valuable publicity had been achieved through a number of media interviews with dockers who did not wish to strike. These dockers saw the motive of supporting Mr Scargill as "nothing to do with them" and had proved capable of explaining themselves clearly and convincingly. The Chairman of the



Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) was keeping in touch with both sides to the dispute (as his statutory duty regarded him to do) but did not see much scope for action.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that it was essential to keep the real causes and purposes of the dock strike clearly before the country, but that the dock strike must not be allowed to divert attention from the issues involved in the miners' strike. It might be useful to make available to the media, in due course, details of traffic diverted from strikebound UK ports to Continental ports. The necessary preparations should be put in hand to collect this information: the Group would then consider the matter further. It would also be helpful to examine the scope of the action which it would be open for the Government to take to mitigate the effects of the dispute on industry, relying on the Emergency Powers Act 1920 in its present form; and the possible need to bring forward an amending Bill if it became necessary for a State of Emergency to be declared.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Transport to arrange for the collection of information about diverted traffic on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.
3. Invited the Home Secretary, in consultation with the Attorney General, to examine and report on the powers available under the Emergency Powers Act 1920 on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.

Cabinet Office  
30 August 1984