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MISC 101(84) 37th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
FRIDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 1984 at 12.00 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 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

The Rt Hon Peter Rees QC MP  
Chief Secretary, Treasury

Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP  
Solicitor General

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

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

Mr John Stradling Thomas MP  
Minister of State, Welsh Office

The Rt Hon John Wakeham MP  
Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury

The Hon William Waldegrave MP  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State  
Department of the Environment

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong  
Mr P L Gregson  
Mr J F Stoker

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1. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that pits working normally that day numbered 42, with a further 3 on holiday; those turning some coal numbered 7, with 2 on holiday; those with some men present numbered 17 and those not working numbered 103, of which 1 would normally be on holiday.

Attendances in all areas were higher than a week previously and continued to increase slowly. The increase in Scotland, where, for example, attendances at Bilston Glen had trebled over three weeks, was largely due to the performance of Mr Wheeler, the Director of the Scottish Area of the National Coal Board (NCB).

The recent improvement in coal movements was being maintained in spite of the vote at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to support the miners' strike. 45 coal trains had run the previous day, the highest daily figure since May. He expected that more than 700,000 tonnes of coal would be delivered to consumers during the current week.

Mr MacGregor, the Chairman of the National Coal Board, had been in touch with him about the further talks between the Board and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) at 7.00 pm on 9 September, which now seemed sure to take place. Though Mr Scargill's tactics were not entirely predictable, his own view was that the talks would probably break down. If so, it was to be hoped that the NCB would learn the lesson of previous abortive talks and take steps to prevent the initiative on presentation in the media from passing immediately to the NUM. He understood that Mr MacGregor had agreed to be interviewed on television by Mr David Frost on the morning of 9 September, though he himself strongly hoped that Mr MacGregor would be reconsidering this now that talks with the NUM had been fixed for later in the day.

Earlier discussion of means of lifting planning conditions restricting the movement of coal by road had been overtaken by events at the Springhill opencast site, where stocks had begun to smoulder. The rail unions had been asked to handle the movements from the site which were necessary to make it



safe, but had refused. Staffordshire County Council had still not given their agreement to move coal from the site by road, but steps had been taken to do so at a rate of 25,000 tonnes per week. This was in accordance with emergency provisions laid down in the planning conditions attached to the site.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that it was too early to tell whether the large numbers involved in incidents over the previous two days at pits at Kellingley and Kiveton Park were an indication of a change of tactics by the NUM back to concentrated mass picketing. He intended in a speech on the following day both to make a further announcement on arrangements for financing the policing of the dispute and on the steps which had been taken to accelerate, by the appointment of stipendiary magistrates and by other means, the rate at which cases arising from the dispute were being heard by the courts. Since the speech by the Leader of the Opposition to the TUC on 4 September, 36 policemen had been injured. This underlined the fact that Mr Scargill had shown at the TUC that he was able to prevent violence if he chose; and that ritual condemnations of violence by the Opposition were not enough to produce any satisfactory effect. He did not propose to make these points in his speech the following day, as he would have done had talks between the NCB and NUM not been in prospect for the following day; but would do so, if appropriate, in a further speech on 11 September.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that discussions continued between the British Rail (BR) Board and the rail unions on the issues over which industrial action had been threatened for the following week. Reports that significant concessions had been made to the unions were incorrect. He thought it improbable, however, that the work-to-rule threatened from 10 September would now be imposed either on the railways or by the staff of London Regional Transport (LRT), though it was still likely that LRT staff would strike for the day on 12 September.

Despite events at the TUC, movements of coal had improved during the week, with slightly higher numbers of railwaymen prepared to cross picket lines and run coal trains.



THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that the British Steel Corporation (BSC) continued to maintain planned production. Dockers at Immingham had voted to load ore for Scunthorpe into lorries in spite of pressure from the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) not to do so. Coke had been moved by lorry from Orgreave the previous day: no pickets had been present. That day, one coal ship was completing its unloading at Hunterston and another was expected to dock at Port Talbot. At Teeside, where a further coal ship was unloading, it was likely that dockers would vote that day to join the strike: this would cause no immediate difficulty at the steelworks, where stocks were high.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT said that it would be both possible and precedented to suspend the operation of the Clean Air Act 1956, if desired, in order to allow the burning of fuels other than smokeless fuels or fuels capable of being burnt smokelessly.

In discussion, it was suggested that it would be consistent with the earlier tactics of the NUM leadership to try to spin out talks with the NCB in the hope that the strike might become more general both within and beyond the coal industry in the wake of the vote in its support at the TUC Annual Congress. It was essential to watch developments following the TUC vote closely.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that Ministers should do or say nothing to prejudice the limited prospects for progress in talks between the NCB and NUM on 9 September. No doubt the Chairman of the NCB would be giving careful consideration in advance to the best means of handling a breakdown should it occur; and ensuring that he had access to the best available advice and administrative support during the talks. The Group would meet to review developments on 10 September. For the longer-term, union response to the TUC vote in support of the striking miners should continue to be carefully watched.

The Group -

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



2. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE DOCKS

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that 70 men were working at Tilbury that day. 120, a surprisingly large number, were also working at Bristol. At Teesside, however, it was likely that dockers would vote in the course of the day to join the strike. Picketing had, for the most part, been fairly light. The police had been warned, however, that pickets from Southampton might soon return in increased numbers to Felixstowe.

The result of the management's ballot of dockers at Tilbury was expected later in the day. It was expected that a majority of those voting would vote to return. The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), however, had advised its members not to take part, and would no doubt claim abstentions as votes in favour of the strike. When the result was announced, the Port of London Authority (PLA) would repeat the assurances of continued employment which it had given to working dockers. Buses would be provided for those wanting to go back to work on 10 September. The PLA were in touch with the police, who were taking precautions against intimidation. Port employers elsewhere in the country were watching events at Tilbury closely.

The National Dock Labour Board had, on the previous day, postponed for a week its ruling on whether recent unloading of fish at Grimsby had breached the National Dock Labour Scheme. This was an important setback for the attempts of the TGWU to establish some legitimate grounds for the strike. A message from the Secretary of the Docks Group of the TGWU to its members had included a reference to issues in the strike arising

"in carrying out the Union's policy of support for the miners in their current dispute."

It was important that strikers and the public should be reminded on appropriate occasions that this, rather than any industrial issue, was the true motive of the strike.



In summary, rather less than half of the ports were working in terms of manpower, but rather more than half in terms of tonnage. The TGWU were pressing for renewed talks with the British Steel Corporation (BSC) to agree quotas for deliveries of coal and ore to Ravenscraig. Some port employers were reported also to favour such negotiations as a means of solving a dispute to which they did not consider themselves a party. He proposed to meet the port employers shortly.

In discussion the following were the main points made.

- a. The recent vote by dockers at Fleetwood overturning an earlier decision to return to work was reported to have been taken after 200 strikers from Liverpool had visited the docks and surrounding areas. The police should be on the alert for intimidation of dockers wishing to work: it was to be hoped that attempts at intimidation would receive a firm response from working dockers themselves.
- b. In the docks, as in the steel and electricity generation industries, there were signs of increased pressures, following the vote earlier that week in the TUC, to take action in order to support the striking miners. It would be necessary to watch developments carefully.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the police should make every effort to safeguard against intimidation of working dockers and to ensure that any docker who wished to go into his place of work was able to do so. The Group took note that the Secretary of State for Transport had it in mind to meet the port employers shortly: he should handle the timing and conduct of any such meeting carefully, having regard to possible repercussions on the coal and docks disputes; and in particular on any negotiations in progress at the time between the NCB and NUM.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

7 September 1984