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MISC 101(84) 38th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 1984 at 5.00 pm

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 Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

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 Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP
Solicitor General

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

Lord Trefgarne
Parliamentary Under-Secretary 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

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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 holidays for those pits working normally or turning some coal were now finished and attendances that day had shown an improvement on the previous week - particularly in Scotland. Last week more than 700,000 tonnes of coal had been moved from pits, 550,000 tonnes to the Central Electricity Generating Board, and prospects for a continuation of this high level of coal movement for the current week were good. Lorries had begun to move coal from Springhill opencast mine and would possibly begin to move coal later in the week from another opencast pit experiencing overheating problems amongst coal stocks. He would look again at the situation regarding coal faces and pits threatened with closure through lack of maintenance and report back.

There were as yet no indications of progress being likely in the current round of talks between the National Coal Board (NCB) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). In the event of the talks breaking down the NCB might decide to publicise the full set of current proposals and challenge Mr Scargill to ballot his members on whether to accept them. In these circumstances it would be necessary to consider the best ways of providing Ministerial support for the NCB and marshalling media backing for a ballot.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that British Rail had run 43 coal trains on the previous Friday and hopes were high that this improved level of deliveries could be maintained or bettered - especially as the railway unions had called off their proposed nationwide work to rule, and the one day strike in the London area that had been planned for 12 September. Contrary to some press reports the British Rail Board had made no concessions of any substance to the rail unions.

THE MINISTER OF STATE, DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY said that the British Steel Corporation were maintaining planned steel production and supplies of coal, coke and iron ore were still being delivered at satisfactory levels.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that if the current NCB/NUM talks broke down and consequent pressures failed to persuade Mr Scargill to hold a ballot of his members it might be necessary to reconsider the possibility of an NCB sponsored ballot - although the outcome of a recent Scottish newspaper opinion poll in respect of Bilston Glen did not give unqualified confidence that an NCB organised ballot would prove helpful. There was a risk of intimidation during a ballot unless it was properly organised, took place at the collieries and was guaranteed to be secret. The NCB's tactics would need to be reviewed once the outcome of the talks were clear. Account would need to be taken of the possible effect of local pressures on miners, from other industries dependent on the mining sector for their own livelihood. Meanwhile Ministers and Government spokesmen should continue to maintain a low profile whilst talks were in progress.

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 back on the results of his re-examination of coal faces and pits faced with closure through lack of maintenance during the strike.

SECRET AND PERSONAL

2. INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE DOCKS

The Group received an oral report.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the situation in the docks was at present confused, with officials of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) making great efforts to spread the strike whilst employers were trying to get dockers at strikebound ports back to work. The outcome of the Port of London Authority (PLA) ballot of dockers at Tilbury showed a clear majority in favour of a return to work, but a substantial, albeit peaceful, picket had that day deterred all but 75 of the morning shift and 139 of the afternoon shift from reporting for work; normally some 700 would have been at work. At Bristol about 300 men - of whom 117 were believed to be registered dock workers (rdws), had reported for work following last week's vote at an unofficial meeting. Dockers at Teesdock and Barry had rejoined the strike and three senior Trade Union Officials (Messrs Todd and Connolly (TGWU) and Knapp (National Union of Railwaymen)) were scheduled to meet dockers at Grimsby and Immingham the following day to persuade them to join the strike. The PLA were thought to be anxious to see whether greater numbers reported for work at Tilbury in the next day or so before considering any further action to encourage a bigger return to work. It seemed doubtful whether other port employers could use an employer-organised ballot with a reasonable prospect of a successful outcome. Some of them were facing mounting financial problems and were thought to be considering placing rdws for whom, due to the strike, there was no work, on the temporary unattached register. As this would be a clear contravention of the Jones/Aldington agreement such action would provide a credible basis for an all out dock strike call, which would almost certainly be obeyed, and was therefore to be strongly discouraged. There must also be increasing prospects of some employers seeking injunctions under the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts. It would be preferable for smaller employers, who were likely to be hardest hit financially, to take the lead in such action, once it was clear that they had a sound case.

So far picketing in connection with the dock strike had been peaceful and largely successful, as many rdws had an instinctive and traditional reluctance to cross picket lines despite the expressed wish of many of them to return to work. It would appear that intimidatory tactics being used on dockers were more subtle than those used against working miners.

The following points were raised in discussion -

- a. The new employment legislation, with its provisions making immunity for strike action dependant on the holding of a ballot, would take effect on 24 September. It would be useful to have clarification as to how far the new legislation might be relevant to the current coal and docks disputes; and, in particular whether immunity for strike action at an individual port which began after 24 September would depend on the holding of a ballot at that port.
- b. Military movements in relation to Exercises LIONHEART and BOLD GANNET were planned through the strikebound port of Southampton on 12 September. No trouble was anticipated but there were contingency plans ready to divert to other ports should the need arise.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that there was a need to clear up the uncertainty about the impact of the new strike ballot legislation without delay. The Group would also need to return soon to consideration of the likely efficacy of the current Emergency Powers Legislation, should a prolonged partial or total dock strike result in a need to use it. Port employers should be actively discouraged from moves likely to breach the Jones/Aldington agreement. There was no alternative at present for Ministers and Government spokesmen to maintaining a low profile in relation to the dock strike, but preparations should be made to resume a campaign to highlight the absence of a genuine "docks" reason for the strike when the moment was ripe. There was however no reason to avoid comment on law and order problems when reasonable opportunities arose.

The Group -

1. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
2. Invited the Solicitor General, in consultation with the Secretary of State for Employment to examine the impact of the legislation concerning strike ballots, due to come into operation on 24 September, with a view to clarifying the points brought up during the Group's discussion.
3. Invited the Home Secretary to report, at an early date, on those aspects of current Emergency Powers Legislation mentioned by the Prime Minister in her summing up.

Cabinet Office

11 September 1984