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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
THURSDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 1984 at 10.30 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 Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

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 George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Scotland

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 Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney-General

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

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The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that with only one pit now on holiday there were 44 working normally. The number of pits at which some men were present had increased by five and for the first time since the beginning of the dispute there were now less than 100 pits on strike. Attendance in the North Derbyshire coalfield was 10 per cent greater than at the same time last week and a new record attendance had once again been achieved at Bilston Glen. It was expected that coal production and movement in the current week would be better than the previous week, which had been the fourth consecutive week in which a net rise in power station coal stocks had been achieved. It was noteworthy that rail borne deliveries had improved since the recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Brighton. Over the next couple of months there could be conflicting demands for lorries as the domestic sugar beet harvest was gathered in, but the National Coal Board (NCB) had entered into contracts with haulage firms to safeguard road movement of coal.

The previous day's talks between the NCB and delegates of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) had been reported to have been conducted in a good atmosphere. He understood that the NCB had indicated a readiness to revert to the pre-15 August procedures concerning NACODS members crossing National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) picket lines and to make the requisite payments to NACODS members adversely affected by picketing. The NCB had not agreed to a NACODS request to withdraw their 6 March proposals on pit closures, but had said they were prepared to discuss the matter with NACODS as they had been, and were, prepared to discuss the subject with the NUM. The result of the NACODS ballot was due to be announced the following day and the NACODS Executive were also due to meet in order to discuss the NCB proposals. It was expected that a further NCB/NACODS meeting would be held during the following week but it was not yet clear whether NACODS members would be called out on strike if the ballot produced, as expected, the necessary 66 per cent majority. The NCB hoped that their offer at the previous day's meeting would be sufficient to avert immediate strike action.

At a meeting, also the previous day, of representatives of Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) members in the open cast mining industry it had been agreed that movement of coal from stocks at open cast sites would be blocked. This was in reality no change to the current situation; the weekly movement of some 150,000 tonnes from open cast sites was from newly produced coal and a similar tonnage had gone into stock each week of the current month. It was thought possible that the TGWU might ballot their members on any further action in support of the open cast workers claim for improved redundancy payments.

There was little sign of enthusiasm amongst the leaders of TGWU members in the electricity supply industry to block deliveries of coal and oil to power stations, though it remained possible that some action might eventually be taken.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that two Stipendiary Magistrates had now been sitting for three weeks and were beginning to reduce the backlog of cases arising from the miners dispute. In the last seven days the number of miners sentenced to terms of imprisonment by magistrates had risen from 32 to 37. The longest sentence imposed was 9 months. There had been as yet no further requests for additional Stipendiary Magistrates to be appointed but he was keeping a close watch on the situation. Of more than 7,000 arrested for offences in connection with the dispute some 1,200 had now been tried. The Lord Chancellor was understood to be examining the lists of cases committed for trial at Crown Courts with a view to seeing what could be done to speed up the hearing of the more serious cases. It would be helpful if greater publicity could be given to sentences imposed by courts, particularly the more severe ones. It seemed that the recent violence, directed from M4 motorway bridges in South Wales against lorry convoys for Llanwern, was designed primarily to distract police attention from power stations and collieries.

During discussion the following were the main points made -

- a. The TUC should be pressed to insist that their own code of practice on picketing should be observed by the NUM, thus reducing the level of violence and intimidation and making it easier for those miners, who

so wished, to return to work. There were indications that in most NCB areas a high proportion of those on strike were ready to return to work if they could do so with a reasonable prospect of safety for themselves, their families and their property. It was however very difficult to obtain adequate evidence to support prosecutions against the organisers of violence and intimidation.

- b. It would be helpful if NCB officials could make more frequent and effective media appearances, both nationally and locally.
- c. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) would continue to keep in touch with both the NUM and NCB but it seemed highly improbable that ACAS would be in a position to assist in bringing the two sides together. It was important that the public should recognise that the main obstacle to progress was Mr Scargill's intransigence over the closure of uneconomic pits.
- d. It might now be opportune to give greater and more sustained publicity to the plans already made by the NCB to provide financial and other support for miners and mining communities likely to be affected by pit closures.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion said that the most important current problem was to get the threat of strike action by NACODS members lifted and nothing should be said or done to prejudice the successful outcome of the NCB/NACODS negotiations. It would be helpful if Ministerial speeches and media appearances prior to and during the coming weekend could highlight clearly the law and order aspects of the dispute.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

28 September 1984