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MISC 101(84) 48th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 20 NOVEMBER 1984 at 10.45 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
Office

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 Nicholas Edwards MP
Secretary of State for Wales

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Lord Young of Graffham
Minister without Portfolio

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Mr Norman Lamont MP
Minister of State
Department of Trade and Industry

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

The Hon Alan Clark MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
Department of Employment

SECRETARLAT

Mr P L Gregson
Brigadier J A J Budd

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION 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 the continuing increase in the number of miners returning to work some pits were reverting to a two or three shift pattern of work and therefore the early morning figures would in future tend to be a less reliable indicator of the true position. The previous days early morning figure had been 1500, whereas the whole day's total was 2282. That days morning figure showed a further 790 men reporting for work for the first time. There had been particularly encouraging increases in the North East (651 the previous day, 144 so far that day); Yorkshire (500 the previous day); North Derbyshire (400 the previous day, 130 so far that day); The Western Area (390 the previous day) and Scotland, where coal was now being mined at Monkton Hall Colliery. There were now only 27 pits without men present; of the other 147, 45 were working normally, and 17 were turning some coal. It was likely that two or three pits in the latter category would soon move up to the 'normal working' category.

South Wales miners were under intense pressure to remain on strike, but even so a further 16 men had reported for work that day and just over 100 men were now working in the coalfield. By contrast there had been 91 per cent of normal attendance for work at Bersham Colliery in North Wales the previous day and the figure was expected to rise further that day.

There had been some difficulties about attendance, at a number of pits in Yorkshire and one in Scotland, by members of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) but he expected them to be overcome satisfactorily.

As the working miners had still not received the pay increase they were offered from November 1983 the National Coal Board (NCB) were likely to make an announcement soon about a lump sum payment on account backdated to November 1983. Those miners returning to work following the end of the current week would derive some benefit from the new payment and this would sustain the incentives for resuming work.

Coal movements the previous week had been 953,500 tonnes, about the same as in the immediately preceding week. With no significant new difficulties being experienced over rail and road movement, he thought it possible that 1 million tonnes of coal might be moved in the current week.

There seemed to be little chance of any further initiatives from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the immediate future. He understood that a formal request for a meeting with church leaders had been made by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and it seemed likely that such a meeting would be held. It was to be hoped that church leaders would be cautious in their dealings with Mr Scargill and would take the opportunity both to condemn violence and to draw attention to the NCB offer already accepted by NACODS.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that there had been some trouble that morning in the West Yorkshire and Durham coalfields, but on a much smaller scale than had been seen recently. He had visited Yorkshire the previous weekend and had been impressed, not only by the high morale of the police officers on duty there, but, also by the care being taken by the NCB and police to brief all individuals seeking to return to work about the situation they would face before including them in the official transport arrangements. He was satisfied that the police were clear about the continuing need to obtain evidence that would permit proceedings to be brought against those who were organising and directing violence and vandalism.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that the sequestrators appointed by the High Court had discovered that £5 million of NUM funds, previously transferred from the Republic of Ireland to the United States of America, had now been moved to three separate locations in Europe and action was in hand to freeze these assets.

In discussion the following were the main points made -

a. There appeared to be a noticeable decline of enthusiasm for picketing in Scotland where half the 50 strong picket that morning at Bilston Glen Colliery, where 705 men were working, came from the Durham area. A further encouraging sign was the fact that 74 per cent of the workforce in the pit at Coventry, earlier the most militant in the Midland coalfield, was now at work.

b. It was hoped that, following a recent ruling by the High Court about the illegality of the special 50p miners' support levy on members of the National Union of Seamen, employers in that industry would now refrain from making the necessary deductions at source. It might also be useful to consider collecting information about the sizeable sums of money being donated to the NUM by a number of local authorities.

c. It was unfortunate that the NCB had not yet selected a chief executive for NCB Enterprises, but delay had resulted from the need to honour internal agreements by advertising such posts widely within the coal industry. It seemed likely that an appointment, from outside the coal industry, would shortly be made.

d. It would be helpful for the group to know how the NCB intended to establish the independent colliery review body that had been an important part of the agreement with NACODS; the composition, terms of reference and criteria for consideration of pits for possible closure would be of particular interest.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the continuing increase in the rate of return to work should be encouraged and fostered by all practicable means. It was noteworthy that over 11000 miners had returned to work in the past 11 days. She had received a letter from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about the recent disclosure of a substantial cash gift to the NUM from Soviet miners, outlining certain proposals by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary for pursuing the matter with the Soviet authorities. The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry was due to lunch that day with the Soviet Ambassador and would take the opportunity to raise the matter with the Ambassador on the lines proposed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

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. to report back when he had discussed with the National Coal Board its thinking about the establishment of the independent colliery review body that had been agreed as part of the settlement with the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers.

ii. to arrange for his officials, in consultation with officials of the Scottish Office, Welsh Office and Department of the Environment to assemble information, for circulation to the Group, about financial assistance to the National Union of Mineworkers by local Authorities

Cabinet Office

20 November 1984

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