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MISC 104(85) 1st Meeting

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CABINET
MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 8 JANUARY 1985 at 11.30 am

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 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 John Stanley MP
Minister of State for the
Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence

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

Mr Michael Ancram MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of
State, Scottish Office

Mr Peter Bottomley MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of
State, Department of Employment

SECRETARIAT

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

SUBJECT

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY

The Group received a number of oral reports.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY said that 433 strikers had abandoned their strike that morning by 10.00 am. This suggested that about 3000 were likely to return to work in the course of the week. For the first time, each pit in Yorkshire had someone present and the trends were promising in all National Coal Board (NCB) Areas except South Wales. The aim now was to get 50 per cent of National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) members back to work: the NCB were carrying out a count of employees who were NUM members to take account of retirements, resignations and other relevant changes since the beginning of the strike.

Members of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) were showing greater readiness to cross picket lines in the North East and Scotland, though problems continued in Yorkshire, where the National President of the Association continued to bring an unhelpful influence to bear. There was no immediate prospect of industrial action by the Association over their pay claim, though they were aware that they were in a strong negotiating position.

512,000 tonnes of coal had been moved over the holiday fortnight, none of which had been assumed in the estimates of endurance made before Christmas. The NCB expected to move about 900,000 tonnes that week. Because of the cold weather, the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) expected an all-time record load during the peak period that evening, but this would not affect the previous assessment that any prospect of power cuts was very remote. The increase which the CEGB was making in coal burn was necessary in the case of some power stations to free space for further deliveries.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that stipendiary magistrates were fully active that week in a number of areas to deal with caseloads arising from the strike. A Crown Court on the previous day had sentenced 9 men to $2\frac{1}{2}$ years imprisonment and a tenth to 3 years. This was the first time that a serious offence

committed by strikers had been dealt with by the Crown Court. He proposed to encourage the widest publicity for the convictions and for the facts of the case as proven in Court.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT said that the Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) were likely to try to secure support from their members for industrial action over the replacement of 2 signalmen who had retired prematurely on medical grounds from the Coalville depot in Leicestershire by more co-operative staff. The British Railways (BR) Board expected that little support would be forthcoming, though it was possible that limited action - perhaps a 24-hour strike - might be taken. Nor was there any threat at the present time of industrial action over railwaymen's pay, though the unions were making tough statements in advance of the settlement date in April. In the meantime, BR would have discussions with the unions about whether and how the large volumes of freight traffic lost to road transport during the strike could be recovered.

THE SOLICITOR GENERAL said that the sequestrators pursuing the national assets of the NUM continued, contrary to some reports, to seek control over NUM funds in Luxembourg. Difficulties over the service of documents on the institution holding the funds had now been overcome. The sequestrators were appealing against the decision of an Irish Court unfreezing most of the NUM funds traced to Dublin. Though the sums which the sequestrators controlled were still small, they had not yet made any call on the indemnity for their costs provided by the Government. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) was being required to provide particulars of its financial dealings with the NUM; and the NUR had been given until 16 January to give details of a loan of £100,000 to the Union.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE, SCOTTISH OFFICE said that 14 Opposition Members of Parliament had appeared the previous morning on the picket line at Polkemmet colliery as part of a campaign to lay the blame on the NCB for failing to prevent serious flooding at the pit by restoring safety cover using white collar staff. The Scottish Area Director of the NCB had responded robustly. It would be necessary for the NCB to continue to present

their case with care to ensure that responsibility for the flooding, which seemed likely to prevent the pit from re-opening, was placed on the NUM, where it belonged.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that, for the present, the best course was to allow current developments to take their course while avoiding public statements of a kind which might prove counterproductive. To the extent that a public line was required, Ministers should point up the absurdity of continuing with the strike. They should stress the favourable terms on offer, the lack of any prospect of power cuts and the substantial numbers of strikers who were returning, and had returned, to work.

The Group -

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

Cabinet Office

8 January 1985