



PM/85/49

PRIME MINISTER

POSSIBLE INDUSTRIAL ACTION BY FCO
COMMUNICATIONS STAFF

1. The purpose of this minute is to give you and some other colleagues advance warning that the FCO's communications network could be affected by a work to rule by members of the FCO's specialist communications staff from the end of May.
2. The background is that the Treasury and my officials have been negotiating with the Civil Service Union (CSU) over pay and grading for staff to operate a new computerised Message Handling System (MHS) for the FCO's telecommunications network, together with associated changes in working arrangements and equipment at Posts overseas.
3. The MHS, which represents an investment of £5.7 million, is similar to ones already installed at GCHQ and the MOD and will provide for the automatic routing of the FCO's telegram traffic, giving us increased capacity and speed of operation to cope with the steadily increasing volume of work. We expect the new system to produce a saving of some 40 staff in the UK. It will also result in the replacement of 54 posts in the UK currently filled by Diplomatic Service Communications Branch staff with radio operating skills which will no longer be required, by operators without such skills.
4. In the wake of the introduction of this system, we are also planning a rationalisation of our radio and telecommunications

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Prime Minister

Disgraceful: but I expect they can be faced down.

MD

CJP 17/5.



technical work overseas by introducing simplified radio equipment which is now available, and by redeploying technically skilled staff.

5. There will be no compulsory redundancies; the savings in staff will be met through natural wastage and a limited voluntary premature retirement scheme. There is no question in my mind that these developments are highly desirable and that we should not be deflected from implementing them.

6. The present round of negotiations with the Unions has been going on for a long time. They have been difficult because of the number of different interests and Unions involved. We have succeeded in obtaining agreement to the changes from the Institute of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS) who represent the technical staff involved, and have negotiated a pay agreement with the Society of Civil and Public Servants (SCPS) representing supervisory operational staff. But the CSU, representing the main body of operating staff, have so far refused to cooperate in the introduction of arrangements concerned with the introduction of the MHS. They have now held a secret ballot of their members in FCO communications serving in the UK which has given them a mandate to take industrial action in the form of a work to rule from 31 May unless agreement is reached on a package covering pay and grading for some staff and assurances on conditions of service for others who are affected by the proposed changes that I have referred to above.

7. The outlines of such a package have been put to the CSU and my officials believe that a negotiated agreement can be achieved and that the majority of staff will not, in the end, support industrial action. But management is also under some time constraints since the new equipment is now being

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installed and we shall suffer both financial and operational penalties if training does not start soon. If we cannot reach agreement, or the Union indulges in delaying tactics, we may have to implement changes by administrative action, which could polarise opinion and result in a work to rule.

8. A work to rule would quickly result in the clogging of the FCO's telegram system. We should make all efforts to mitigate the results, but there would undoubtedly be serious disruption which would affect other Departments, especially the flow of telegrams on EC matters from Brussels. I believe that it would be worth facing this prospect to ensure that we get the necessary changes without paying an exorbitant price or creating precedents which could damage sensitive management/staff relations elsewhere, including GCHQ. The latter point is particularly relevant since the Assistant Secretary of the CSU who has been leading the Trades Union Side in the negotiations was formerly responsible for communications staff at GCHQ. On past experience, our assessment is that we could make arrangements to ensure that a minimum of essential business continued despite a work to rule. I believe there is a fair chance that we shall avoid industrial action, and I shall keep you informed.

9. I am copying this minute to colleagues in those

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Departments which would be most affected should there be any disruption and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

JM.

Foreign & Commonwealth Office
17 May 1985

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17 MAY 1985

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