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MISC 101(85) 5th Meeting

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CABINET

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON COAL

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 4 FEBRUARY 1985 at 11.15 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 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

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

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

SECRETARIAT

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, during the previous week, 676,000 tonnes of deep mined coal had been produced and 229 coal trains had run. The first of these figures was a record for the strike; the second was the highest figure since June 1984. 916,000 tonnes of coal had been moved and power station endurance remained very strong.

Numbers returning to work had been depleted during the previous week by the prospect of a resumption of talks. Although the National Coal Board (NCB) had had two meetings with leaders of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) acting as intermediaries with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), attempts to establish an acceptable basis for resumed talks had come to nothing. The NCB's correspondence with the Union had not been ideally clear or helpfully drafted, but it had nevertheless been plainly understood that talks could not resume because of the failure of the NUM to offer an acceptable basis for them. Following this, the return had resumed that morning at a faster rate: so far, 2,024 new faces had been reported and the eventual figure would be higher. This was the best figure of the year. The figures were particularly high in the North East and Yorkshire, and included the return of 434 to one coke works. The strike leadership were meeting the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) that day at their own request, but it was thought unlikely that progress would be made which would either allow talks between the sides to resume or affect the return to work.

The only face at the profitable Frances pit in Fife had now been lost through fire following the failure of the NUM to co-operate fully enough to save it. One in three working faces in Scotland and one in six in South Wales had now been lost.

He understood that the result of a ballot of members of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) on the NCB offer of a 5.2 per cent pay increase had produced a majority of 60 per cent in favour. This was likely to become public shortly. The NCB were

meeting NACODS that day and would reassure them that the provisions of the settlement reached with them the previous October would be honoured.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that it was necessary to wait for further developments in the strike. In the meantime, the Government's line should be to rebut suggestions that it had intervened to prevent talks, while continuing to support the line taken by the NCB in declining to take part in talks without evidence of a willingness on the part of the NUM to discuss in a meaningful way the problems of uneconomic capacity. The state of play was such that it was now urgent to have a clear indication of the NCB's thinking on how the review procedure provided under their agreement with NACODS would operate and what criteria it would apply. The Secretary of State for Energy should report further in time for discussion of this point to be resumed at Cabinet on Thursday 7 February.

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 further on the matters indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up in time for discussion at Cabinet on 7 February.

Cabinet Office

4 February 1985