CABINET
THE LONDON DOCK STRIKE
Memorandum by the Home Secretary

The Emergencies Committee met this afternoon to consider the situation arising out of the strike of some 7,000 members of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, which has been joined by some 6,000 members of the Transport and General Workers Union. I was invited, as Chairman of the Committee, to report their recommendations to the Cabinet. The Minister of Labour and National Service will be furnishing the Cabinet with a statement of the position from the industrial point of view and will be indicating the measures which he is taking in an endeavour to bring about a settlement. This memorandum deals with the measures which will be required if the strike continues.

2. Executive Measures. The Minister of Labour has already announced today in the House of Commons that the Government are determined to take all the steps necessary to maintain the life of the country. The nature of the strike is such as to make a firm stand by the Government particularly appropriate. We therefore recommend that the Government should forthwith announce its intention, unless the strikers return to work within a very short period, of employing members of the Armed Forces for the purpose of keeping the port of London going.

3. So far as concerns food in particular, it would be possible, despite the strike, to carry on without further unloadings of non-perishable goods to the end of the month, and of perishable goods till 23rd April. This is on the assumption that the strike does not spread meantime to other ports or to other groups of workers such as cold storage men. There can, however, be no question of relating any Government action to food alone. Food may be stowed below other forms of cargo which must be removed first. In any case other forms of cargo, and the turn-round of ships, are vital to the national well-being.

4. Men and transport from the Services could move into the docks before the Easter holidays. This would, however, mean cancelling Easter leave; and, even if there had been no strike, little work would in fact have been done at the docks. In particular, if the troops were sent in during the holidays, the cold storage plants would not be able to receive any perishable goods which they might unload. We therefore conclude that the Services should go in to begin work the first thing on Wednesday, 20th April. Easter leave would make it impossible for them to do so on the Tuesday. The Minister of Defence and the Service Ministers have agreed in the meantime to make all necessary preparations on the assumption that this move will take place.
5. On behalf of the Committee I ask the Cabinet -

(1) To authorise the Emergencies Committee to arrange for Service men and transport to begin work at the Port of London on the morning of Wednesday, 20th April, unless the strike has meantime been settled.

(2) To agree that a Government announcement on these lines should be made forthwith.

6. Legal Steps. This strike creates a precedent in the post war period. It is official in that it has been called by the Executive of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, which we are informed is Communist controlled. Since the procedure laid down in the Conditions of Employment and National Arbitration Order has not been followed it is illegal. We were informed that this is the first strike since the making of the Order which is both official and illegal. There might be a case for instituting criminal proceedings in respect of breach of the Order, but the Committee do not consider such a step would be advisable, at any rate at the present stage. There may, however, be good grounds for civil proceedings being brought by the National Dock Labour Board as the employers of the men concerned. These proceedings would take the form of seeking an injunction requiring the leaders of the strike to refrain from inciting the men to break their contract of service by failing to report themselves as available for work. We have asked the Attorney-General to examine the possibility of such civil proceedings and to advise the Cabinet on the matter tomorrow.

7. Long-Term Considerations. The frequent recrudescence of this form of trouble at the docks calls, in the Committee's opinion, for a thorough investigation into the underlying causes and the devising of means to avoid its recurrence.

J.C.E.

Home Office, S.W.1.

12th April, 1949.