CABINET

THE LONDON DOCK STRIKE

Memorandum by the Minister of Labour and National Service

The relevant facts of this dispute are set out in the attached statement which I made in the House of Commons to-day. I do not think it is necessary to add to that statement except to say that later in the afternoon it was learned that the Tooley Street Wharves had stopped, leaving only Tilbury and the permanent weekly men at work.

Whilst the ostensible object of the strike is to prevent the dismissals of the 32 men, the real purpose is to ensure that removals from the Register should only take place through normal wastage. The class of men about whom the dispute has arisen are Category 'C' men, that is, men who by reason of age or infirmity, are required to attend one call a day only. Their reward if they get no work is attendance money at the rate of 5/- per day. It is contended that so long as these men satisfy the requirement of attending one call a day and do not infringe any of the rules of the Scheme, they should be retained on the Register indefinitely. Discussions are at present proceeding on the question of a Pensions Scheme and it may be that if a mutually satisfactory agreement were reached, the cause of the present agitation would be removed. However that may be, it is clear that any concession along the lines demanded would be unjustified. No other industry could sustain such a burden and it would prove intolerable to the Dock Industry.

The Transport and General Workers' Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers fully accept the need for a comb-out of these "ineffectives". The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers now officially oppose this measure although it follows an agreed decision of the National Dock Labour Board.

In my view, this strike must be firmly resisted and there is no room for concessions of any kind.

An officer of my Department this morning attended a meeting of the National Dock Labour Board, which was sitting in full session, with the exception of Mr. Barrett, the General Secretary of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, who had left the meeting. The Board stated their view most strongly that no concession should be made and they advocated that the Government should immediately take emergency powers as was done on the occasion of the strike in June last.

Close touch has been maintained with the Transport and General Workers Union, who to-day issued a full printed statement to every member, setting out the facts of the cases.
involved and concluding with the following points:-

"(1) The policy of this Union is that we must abide by the machinery that has been established between the National Dock Labour Board and ourselves under the Dock Labour Regulation Scheme.

(2) Every one of our members has had the opportunity of presenting his case and also has the right of being represented at his appeal by an official of his Union.

(3) In the circumstances we say to our members that the strike is unwarranted. The facts of each particular case are known.

(4) Of the total employed in the Port of London, which is approximately 27,000, the number involved is as stated above.

(5) It cannot be said that there has been any desire or attempt to deal with any question of redundancy. The issue is as to whether a man is an effective Port Worker or not."

It seems to me clear that the Transport and General Workers' Union can be fully relied on to make the utmost efforts to secure a resumption.

The position has also been discussed fully with the Port Employers. They originally took the view that the Scheme should be suspended in London so as to restore to them full freedom of action to engage anyone who wished to volunteer. After discussion, however, they no longer press this suggestion but they have stated their conviction that if the members of the Transport and General Workers' Union now on strike can be released from the effect of the Continuity Rule which ties the men to the gangs existing prior to the strike, the men would resume on fresh engagements which would enable fresh gangs to be built up. I am taking this point up with the Transport and General Workers' Union to see whether there is any possibility of securing the Union's co-operation on these lines.

As regards the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, I had an invitation issued to the Executive this morning, to attend at the Ministry to give an explanation of their action in lending official support to an illegal strike. As there was a good deal of resistance to this invitation a letter, as appended, was sent by hand. Later in the afternoon, they intimated by telephone that they were unable to respond to the invitation to-day but would attend tomorrow (Wednesday) afternoon. They announced their intention, however, to bring the Executive of the Lightermen's Union as well as the men who declared, were solid with them and who would tonight also declare an official strike. I have now received information that at the mass meeting of the Lightermen this evening there was a comfortable majority against strike action. I have allowed information to be given to the Press about the insistence of the Stevedores that they would bring the Lightermen's Executive to the meeting tomorrow as I think the Lightermen's decision is a most significant development. I am most hopeful that it indicates that the strike does not command the support which it was planned to receive.
It has been suggested to me that I should broadcast tomorrow night. Subject to any developments tomorrow, I feel that this might have valuable results, particularly if the Transport and General Workers' Union can see their way to permit their members to accept fresh engagements. I have not yet attempted to draft a broadcast talk as its content will depend greatly on the events of tomorrow.

Mass meetings of the Stevedores and Dockers Sections of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers are being held tomorrow and it is difficult to assess the position until the results of those meetings are known but I feel that, in view of the Lightermen's decision, we should not assume that the strike will spread to other ports, although I am informed that that will be attempted.

G.A.I.

Ministry of Labour and National Service,
12th April, 1949.
Private Notice Question by Mr. Eden:

MR. EDEN (by Private Notice Question) asked the Minister if he would make a statement on the strike at the London Docks.

MR. ISAACS: Yes, Sir. In discharge of their responsibility under the Scheme, the National Dock Labour Board on 26th November last issued a directive to the Local Boards, instructing them to remove from the Register men who, by reason of failing health or other physical incapacity which appeared to be of a permanent nature, were unable to meet the minimum requirements of the Scheme, or men who for any other reason were not carrying out to the full their obligations under the Scheme, whether in the reserve pool or in employment.

The National Dock Labour Board includes four representatives of employers and four representatives of workers, the workers' representatives being drawn from the Transport and General Workers' Union, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, and the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, and I am informed by the Board that the directive was issued after full discussion and as a result of a unanimous decision. This directive has been implemented in various ports throughout the country and in London on 10th January the Local Board appointed a Sub-Committee, consisting of two employers and two trade union representatives to deal with the matter. Finally, as a result thirty-three men were given notice of termination, to take effect on 9th April. The men concerned had a right of appeal to tribunals selected by the two sides of the industry, and twenty-one appeals were lodged. One was allowed, leaving a total of thirty-two men whose notices took effect.

Although the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers are represented, both on the National Board and the London Board, members of this Union decided on Sunday last to stop work on Monday in protest against the dismissals. The strike has spread and I am informed by the Board that there are now approximately 13,000 men on strike, including members of the Transport and General Workers' Union, which Union, however, condemns the strike as being unwarranted.

This is a strike against the provisions of a scheme which was adopted by a National Conference of the workers. If any modification or variation of the Scheme is desired, the National Joint Industrial Council for the industry provides the means by which it can be discussed and if agreed brought to my notice. This stoppage of work, affecting as it does the whole traffic of the Port of London, constitutes a challenge to authority. There can be no doubt it is inspired by motives hostile to the best interests of the dockers as a whole and the public.

Important issues are involved and I would ask to be excused from making any further statement at present.
12th April, 1949.

Dear Mr. Barrett,

I refer to our telephone conversation to-day, when you informed me that the strike at the London Docks has received the official support of your Executive.

The Minister cannot enter into any discussion on the merits of the present dispute but, as I informed you, he feels he should have some explanation of the action of your Executive in lending official support to what is clearly an illegal strike.

I am accordingly to invite your Executive to meet me here to-day for that purpose.

Yours sincerely,

(Sgd) R.M. GOULD

R. Barrett, Esq.,
National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers,
653, Commercial Road,
12th April, 1949.

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