WAR CABINET, 476.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Tuesday, September 24, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:

The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P. (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. the Earl Curzon of Kedleston, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.

The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. the Viscount Milner, G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War.

General Sir H. H. Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 2 to 10).


Brigadier-General B. E. W. Childs, C.M.G., Director of Personal Services (for Minute 10).


The Right Hon. Sir G. Cave, K.C., M.P., Secretary of State for Home Affairs (for Minute 10).

Major P. Lloyd Greame, M.C., Ministry of National Service (for Minutes 10 and 11).


Admiral Sir R. E. Wemyss, G.C.B., O.M.G., M.V.O., First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff (for Minutes 2 to 9).

Rear-Admiral Sir H. H. D. Tovey, K.C.M.G., C.B., Fourth Sea Lord and Chief of Supplies and Transport (for Minutes 10 and 11).

The Right Hon. Sir A. Stanley, M.P., President, Board of Trade (for Minutes 10 and 11).

Mr. G. J. Wardle, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary, Board of Trade (for Minute 10).


Sir Stephenson Kent, K.C.B., Director of the Department of Labour Supply, Ministry of Munitions (for Minutes 10 and 11).

Mr. P. G. Lewis, Ministry of Munitions (for Minute 11).

Major M. B. U. Dewar, Ministry of Munitions (for Minute 11).

Sir D. J. Shackleton, K.C.B., Secretary, Ministry of Labour (for Minutes 10 and 11).

Sir H. Walker, K.C.B., Chairman, Railway Executive Committee (for Minute 10).

Lieutenant-Colonel Sir M. P. A. Hankley, Secretary.

Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Wilson, C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P., Assistant Secretary.
Labour Committee.

1. MR. CHAMBERLAIN suggested that, in order to save the time of the Cabinet, a Committee should be set up to deal with questions of Labour, on lines similar to those of the Home Affairs Committee.

The War Cabinet instructed—

The Secretary to place this question on the Agenda Paper at an early date.

Palestine.

2. In continuation of War Cabinet 475, Minute 3, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that General Allenby's troops had occupied Haifa and Acre. The 5th Cavalry Division had entered Haifa on the morning of the previous day, and had met with only slight hostile opposition. The enemy were now withdrawing northwards, pursued by Australian and New Zealand troops, and by the 38th and 39th Battalions of the Royal Fusiliers. Large numbers of enemy prisoners had been taken, in excess of the figures already published. Our advanced guards had now reached Es Salt. It was not yet known how many Germans had been captured among the enemy prisoners.

As far as was known, there were between 4,000 and 6,000 Turks across the Jordan. There was also a small number at Medina, but the bulk of the Turkish forces had gone north and were surrounded by hostile Arabs. It was not improbable that we should capture the whole of the Turkish force on the east of the Jordan.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that satisfactory news had been received to the effect that, as the result of General Allenby's victory, the Turks had withdrawn one of their divisions from the Caucasus.

With regard to the suggestion which had been made to General Allenby by telegram on the previous day, that he should consider the possibility of a cavalry raid on Aleppo, General Wilson said that there appeared to be nothing except the distance to prevent this operation.

The question was raised as to whether there was any likelihood of General Marshall being able to strike at the Turks in some direction, and thereby co-operate in the general movement of driving the Turks back. It was pointed out that General Marshall's chief difficulty appeared to lie in his lack of transport facilities, and in this connection the suggestion was made that some of the large amount of transport that had been captured from the Turks might be useful to General Marshall.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, when the list of General Allenby's booty was known, it would be seen what could be done in assisting General Marshall in that direction.

Naval Assistance.

3. As regards the naval assistance rendered in the recent operations in Palestine, the First Sea Lord reported that two of our destroyers had shelled a small detached body of enemy troops 30 miles north of Jaffa, on 18th September, and had taken part in General Allenby's attack on the 19th.

Congratulations to General Allenby.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that he had drafted a telegram of congratulation to General Allenby for submission to the Prime Minister, who, he understood, was making certain alterations in it.

The War Cabinet decided that—

A message of congratulation, as approved by the Prime Minister, should be sent to General Allenby.
5. With reference to War Cabinet 475, Minute 4, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that good progress was being made on the Macedonian front. The Serbians, who were operating on the west of the British front, had succeeded in cutting the Vardar line between Gradoke and Demir Kapu. The result of this would probably be that the Bulgarian troops opposite the British would be cut off, for feeding purposes, from their main body. It seemed likely that the Bulgarians would now make a stand, if they could, on the Vardar, facing south-west instead of facing south, as they had been doing.

General Wilson then explained on a map the plan of campaign in another direction. The original Bulgan line had occupied all the available troops of the enemy, and if his line were now lengthened he would not have sufficient troops to hold it. His left wing might be turned, and in any case he could not now rest both his flanks on safe places.

With regard to the British advance, which had been made on either side of Lake Doiran, and had been referred to in the above-mentioned minute as not having resulted in any considerable progress, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that later information from General Milne reported that our attack had punished the enemy rather more heavily than had at first been supposed, and that by our attacks we had contained large numbers of the Bulgars.

6. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that our right-hand corps, the IXth, and the whole of the First French Army had attacked that morning opposite St. Quentin, but that no news had yet been received as to the result.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 175, Minute 2, Mr. Chamberlain called the attention of the War Cabinet to the fact that the Army Council, to whom the report of the Mesopotamia Commission had been referred, had exonerated Sir John Nixon. Mr. Chamberlain expressed the view that there ought to be a public announcement to this effect.

Mr. Chamberlain undertook to ask the Secretary of State for India to take up the matter with the Secretary of State for War.

8. The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to the fact that a certain amount of mischief was being caused by the allegation that Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's despatch in regard to the German offensive which developed on the 21st March, 1918, was being withheld.

It was stated that certain alterations in the despatch had been suggested to Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, and that this was the reason of the delay.

The War Cabinet were of opinion that it was advisable for the despatch to be published as soon as possible, and asked—

The Secretary of State for War to take the necessary steps in the matter.

9. The First Sea Lord reported that during the night of the 20th-21st September two of our machines had left Mudros for Constantinople. One machine had to return on account of engine trouble. The other reached her objective and dropped two 65- and eight 16-lb. bombs and pamphlets. Bursts were observed in Haidar Pasha Station, on buildings north of the Admiralty, and on houses in Stamboul. A machine had also left Mudros for Constantinople on the night of the 21st-22nd September, but had failed to return.
10. With reference to War Cabinet 475, Minute 11, the War Cabinet had before them a memorandum on railway unrest by the President of the Board of Trade (Paper G.T-5754).

Sir Albert Stanley stated that the strike, which had started on Sunday night in South Wales, was showing signs of spreading to a number of other areas. The men were out at Plymouth and at Bristol, and very few trains were being worked on the Great Western Railway. In the London area, on the North-Western system, Willesden, Bow, and Plaistow were affected. The men had organised picketing, and were evidently hoping to extend the strike to other railways. Mr. J. H. Thomas and Mr. Bromley had gone down to Newport on the previous evening with a view to addressing the men, but they had been refused a hearing, and the meeting had been broken in upon by some wounded soldiers. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Bromley were endeavouring to meet the men in Newport that morning, but with what success was not yet known. There were signs that the men on strike did not believe the decision come to last week to be final, and he (Sir Albert Stanley) had therefore made it perfectly plain to both leaders that, while the Government were always prepared to meet the Executives of the Railway Unions, there was not the slightest chance of the Government receding from the decision reached on Thursday last. In the event of the efforts to terminate the strike that day proving unavailing, he wished the authority of the Cabinet to deal with picketing, to protect railway property, and to continue working the trains as far as possible. For these purposes the co-operation of the War Office would be necessary. He proposed to invite representatives of the leading newspapers to meet him that afternoon, and he would explain fully to them the steps which the Government had decided to take to deal with the situation. He was confident that the attitude of the press would be in complete accord with the policy of the Government.

Sir Herbert Walker stated that the Railway Executive were of opinion that the Government should not delay action until the following morning, but should issue a notice, say at 6 P.M. that day, announcing that the military would be called out immediately to protect men remaining at work, and to safeguard railway property. It was important also not only to be able to place an embargo on the funds of the Unions, but to have picketing stopped; but he doubted whether the police or the soldiers had legal power to stop picketing.

Sir George Cave said that he thought that picketing, in so far as it affected munitions of war, could be dealt with under the Defence of the Realm Act (Clause 42), and that, if that were not adequate, a fresh Regulation could be made. In reply to a suggestion, Sir George Cave said that to proclaim martial law would hardly give the Government greater legal powers than could be obtained under the Defence of the Realm Act.

General Seeley stated that, if the strike continued for three days, it would stop altogether the output of gas and bring a number of filling factories to a standstill. It was important, in any public announcement, to dwell on the urgent needs of the Army and Navy.

General Childs said that, in the previous strike in South Wales, the most effective method of dealing with picketing had been found to be to proceed under the Protection of Property Act. The main difficulty had been to protect the property of the men remaining at work, and to do that thoroughly required a considerable body of troops.

Lord Reading said it was not desirable to say in terms that the Government were challenging peaceful picketing, because that might excite the South Wales miners.

Lord Milner thought that it was desirable that some responsible person should see the chief press associations and inform them in time for that day’s evening papers that the Government intended to use all the resources of the State to secure the necessary supplies for our soldiers and sailors, the transport of the wounded, and the
conveyance to their homes of men arriving in this country on leave.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The Government resist the strike and that no further concessions be discussed;
(b.) The personnel of the Royal Navy, Army, and Royal Air Force should be drawn on for the maintenance of essential traffic and for the protection of buildings, material, and the personnel remaining at work;
(c.) Picketing should be stopped, and that the Home Secretary should consider the question of the power under which this is to be effected;
(d.) The President of the Board of Trade should take steps to put an embargo on the funds of the Unions concerned;
(e.) The President of the Board of Trade should do his utmost to bring public opinion on the side of the Government. To this end he should maintain close touch with the press throughout the strike, and should acquaint them with the nature of the action decided upon by the War Cabinet. In particular, he should cause it to be known throughout the country in that day’s evening papers that the Government had decided to resist the strike, and that the fighting forces would be used for the purposes mentioned in (b);
(f.) A Committee should be formed, with the following composition:

The President of the Board of Trade (Chairman),
Representatives of the Admiralty,
Representatives of the War Office,
Representatives of the Air Department,
Representatives of the Home Office,
Representatives of the Ministry of Labour,
Representatives of the Ministry of National Service,

to remain in session during the strike, for the purpose of co-ordinating the activities of the various Departments in carrying out the above decisions, and generally in dealing with the strike.

The Coal Situation. 11. With reference to War Cabinet 470, Minute 8, the War Cabinet had under consideration a memorandum by the Coal Controller (Paper G.T.-5507), a memorandum by the Minister of Labour (Paper G.T.-5523), and a letter from Sir A. Nimmo to the Prime Minister (Paper G.T.-5737) on the subject of the coal situation.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he had already discussed this question with the Secretary of State for War, and was of opinion that it would be advisable that a Committee, composed of representatives of the Ministry of National Service, the War Office, and the Board of Trade, should be set up, in order that a definite plan should be prepared for the best and quickest method by which miners could be released to the mines from the three fighting Services if the War Cabinet decided that such a course was essential in the national interest. A report on this question had already been rendered (Paper G.T.-5589), as a result of a decision of a conference held on the 31st August, but this report did not go into detail. It would desirable for this Committee to prepare plans based on the two alternatives, namely, returning men from France, or from those recently recruited.

The Adjutant-General said that of the 25,000 miners to be released in accordance with the decision of the War Cabinet, 15,200 men had been returned to the mines by Sunday last. Instructions had
also been sent to France to comb out miners from the Labour Corps, and it was expected that these might number some 10,000.

Questioned as to whether the coal output had increased owing to propaganda and other efforts made to this end, the Coal Controller said that the output for the week ending the 14th September was 3,895,000 tons, as compared with an output of 3,591,000 tons for the week ending the 3rd August. This was only for English and Welsh mines, and, while there was considerable improvement, this improvement was mainly due to a recovery from the influenza epidemic and the incidence of recruiting.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Secretary of State for War should call together a Committee, composed of representatives of the Ministry of National Service, the Board of Trade, and the War Office, to decide on a detailed scheme for the withdrawal of miners from the army, which could be put in force at short notice if the War Cabinet decided that such a course was essential to meet the coal situation.

Food Prices and Subsidies.

12. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Food Controller, directing the attention of the War Cabinet to the increased prices of the necessaries of life and to the necessity of considering whether any portion of this increase should be borne by an extension of State subsidies already applied to bread (Paper G.T.-5714). Mr. Clynes pointed out in his memorandum that, at recent meetings of the Consumers’ Council and of the Trades Union Congress, resolutions had been passed in support of extending the policy of subsidies to meat; but it was clear that the case of meat could not be considered separately from the cases of other foodstuffs or other necessaries of life, whereas a cheap and plentiful supply of bread had always been regarded as essential. Mr. Clynes suggested that the War Cabinet should authorise one of their members to consult with a representative of the Treasury, the Ministry of Labour, and the Food Controller, to consider whether any scheme could be framed for securing, by an extension of subsidies, a greater measure of industrial peace.

The War Cabinet decided that—

It was not desirable to extend the policy of subsidies.

Gallipoli Decorations.

13. With reference to War Cabinet 473, Minute 10, Mr. Bonar Law informed the War Cabinet that he had sought and received the approval of His Majesty the King to the proposal to set up a Committee to consider questions connected with the grant of decorations for war services in Gallipoli.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
September 24, 1918.