Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on
Friday, December 6, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:
The Prime Minister (in the Chair).


The following were also present:
The Right Hon. A. J. Balfour, O.M., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minute 1).
The Right Hon. the Earl of Reading, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., His Majesty's High Commissioner and Special Ambassador to the United States of America.
The Right Hon. the Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 6 to 10).

General Sir Henry H. Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1 to 6).
Major-General Sir G. M. W. Macdonogh, K.C.M.G., C.B., Adjutant-General to the Forces (for Minutes 6 to 10).
The Right Hon. Sir A. Stanley, President of the Board of Trade (for Minute 1).

Sir W. F. Maerwood, K.C.B., Board of Trade (for Minute 1).
Sir H. Walker, K.C.B., Chairman, Railway Executive Committee (for Minute 1).
Sir J. Stevenson, Bart., Ministry of Munitions.


W. Dally Jones, C.M.G. Acting Secretary.

Captain L. F. Burgess, Assistant Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.
1. WITH reference to War Cabinet 509, Minute 1, the War Cabinet had a further discussion in regard to the railway situation.

The Prime Minister said that the country was again confronted with the danger of a serious strike, arising out of the old quarrel between the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the National Union of Railwaymen. He had seen Mr. J. H. Thomas on the previous Thursday, who had said that he would support the Government if they took the line that they could not give an answer to the question until after the General Election. It now appeared, however, that Mr. Thomas was not in a position to fulfil his promise. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Bromley insisted on obtaining an answer that day. The question was one of redeeming a promise given on behalf of the Government by Mr. Barnes and Sir Albert Stanley (referred to in War Cabinet 507, Minute 1) that the question of reducing the hours of labour would be considered by the War Cabinet within a month of the cessation of hostilities. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Bromley were demanding an eight-hours day for both Unions.

The Prime Minister pointed out that public opinion also demanded an eight-hours day for these men. The public were coming to the conclusion that it was a question not whether the men could stand the physical strain of a longer day, but that the working classes were entitled to the same sort of leisure as the middle classes. The workmen said that they were not going to be working machines but that they required time to enjoy life as well. The demand was one for more human conditions for the working classes, and it was a demand which, in view of public opinion, would be very difficult to resist.

The President of the Board of Trade said that he agreed with the Prime Minister that it would be difficult and unwise to resist the demand. In this instance, the railway leaders were acting well within the above-mentioned pledge, given in August 1917, on behalf of the Government. He had tried to induce the railway leaders to postpone the question until after the General Election, but he had not been successful in doing so. Mr. Thomas was willing enough, but he could not get Mr. Bromley to agree.

The Prime Minister suggested that while the eight-hours day might be adopted as a general principle, perhaps it might be possible to make exceptions in the case of certain classes of railway-men, such as those who worked in parts of the country where there was very little traffic.

Sir Herbert Walker said that such a proportion of the workers would amount to about one-fifth.

Sir Albert Stanley said that if an attempt were made to exclude the one-fifth from the general principle, it was extremely probable that the rest of the Union would stand by the one-fifth.

Sir Eric Geddes agreed with Sir Albert Stanley in this respect. Sir Albert Stanley said that while he would try in his negotiations to exclude the one-fifth, at the same time he did not wish to let the matter become the ground for a general strike. He added that the cost of establishing the eight-hours principle would amount to about twenty to twenty-five million sterling.

In this connection Lord Curzon pointed out that the question was bound up in the larger issue of the nationalisation of railways, and Sir Herbert Walker added that, apart from State control, the railway companies under normal conditions would never have conceded the eight-hours principle, because they could not afford it. Such an increased cost as 25 millions would involve an increase of something like 40 per cent. on the goods rates, and from a commercial point of view it could not be justified.

The President of the Board of Trade agreed that the English railways, apart from State control, could not possibly meet the demand, as indeed they were already bankrupt without this increased burden.
The Prime Minister said that, although the English railways, apart from State control, might not have agreed to grant the demand, at the same time they might have been forced by Act of Parliament to do so, as had happened in the case of granting terms to the miners before the war.

Sir Eric Geddes showed that this increase of 25 millions now added to an increase of 50 millions already granted since the war, was equivalent to an increase in wages of something like 150 per cent., and was in excess of concessions to any other classes of workers, but the Prime Minister pointed out that the wages of agricultural labourers had trebled.

Sir Albert Stanley said that there was another aspect of the case, namely, that of the Irish railways, which were in a hopeless financial position, and could not possibly justify the eight-hours day principle. He doubted whether the railway Unions would carry the issue to the point of a strike if the Irish railways were not included, but it would be very difficult to exclude them. He would do his best, however, to keep the Irish railways out of the proposals.

The War Cabinet were unanimous in their opinion that the present demand of the Unions for the establishment of the eight-hour principle could not be resisted, though they were aware that the whole question might be raised again later on.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The President of the Board of Trade in his negotiations with the Unions should agree to accept the principle of the eight-hours day, making the best arrangements he could in the case of the percentage of workers in those parts of the country where traffic was very light, and also in the case of the Irish railways.

He should announce that a Committee would be set up after the General Election with powers to investigate the whole question in regard to the conditions of wages and service of men engaged upon the railways; and that a separate Committee should be set up to deal with the case of Ireland.

Sinking of H.M.S. Cassandra."

Clothing and Equipment for the Russian Armies in Siberia.

Medical Examination, on Demobilisation of Men serving in the Army.

2. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that a message had been received to the effect that H.M.S. "Cassandra," while proceeding from Libau to Reval, had struck a mine and had sunk. The crew had been taken off by destroyers, and the names of eleven men missing, probably killed by explosion, were being transmitted by wireless telegraph.

3. With reference to War Cabinet 477, Minute 15, the War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Paper G.T.-6421) in which he asked for the sanction of the War Cabinet to the despatch of equipment, clothing, and general ordnance stores for a further 100,000 men in the Russian armies in Siberia; this was to include the provision of such guns as could be spared up to 200.

The War Cabinet gave their sanction to this proposal of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

4. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Minister of National Service (Paper G.T.-6394) in regard to the Medical examination, on demobilisation, of men serving in the army.

The War Cabinet referred this question to be decided by Mr. Chamberlain.
5. The War Cabinet had before them an Interim Report by the Demobilisation Committee (Paper G.T.-6277) together with the Committee's Supplementary Report (Paper G.T.-6277a), making certain recommendations with regard to Demobilisation and Reconstruction Schemes.

General Smuts said that the finance of these schemes had been approved by the Treasury, and all that was now needed was Cabinet sanction in order that the schemes might be put in hand at once.

The War Cabinet agreed to the proposals made by the Demobilisation Committee in their Interim and Supplementary Reports (Papers G.T.-6277 and 6277a respectively), and requested General Smuts to see that the schemes were put into operation at the earliest possible moment.

6. The Prime Minister said that the position of releasing men from the army was very unsatisfactory as far as he could gather. We had in France an army of 2,000,000 men, and at the outside 300,000 of these men were required for the army of occupation in Germany. He would like to know what steps were being taken in order to demobilise the remainder at the earliest possible moment.

General Smuts said that authority had been given for demobilisers and pivotal men to be released up to the number of 150,000. This number was in addition to the coal miners ordered to be released.

The Prime Minister said that in spite of the fact that authority had been given for the release of these men, his information was that this was taking place only in very small numbers. If these men could be brought home, peace industries could be started immediately.

Sir Stephenson Kent said that he considered that the limiting factor in regard to this matter was the transport in France. Exclusive of the sick, wounded, and men on leave, only 700 men were being brought home each day. The scheme of demobilisation laid down that the men in the army at home should be demobilised at the same rate and, as nearly as possible in the same numbers, as the armies abroad. This was only fair, as it would cause a great deal of dissatisfaction to the men who had served in the trenches if they imagined that the man at home was being demobilised before them, and could, further, obtain the pick of employment.

Lord Weir said that the Air Force desired to demobilise as quickly as possible. Their officers had no men to command, and therefore very little to do, which was the worst thing possible for them. On his own responsibility he had demobilised the Air Force cadets. He only wished to keep airmen in proportion to the needs of the two services.

General Smuts said that an agreement had been arrived at with the Army Council by which officers and men who had pre-war employment waiting for them, or whose training had been interrupted, should be demobilised at the earliest possible moment, in addition to the pivotal men.

Sir Stephenson Kent drew attention to the fact that the Ministry of Labour had only had permission to set up the machinery for releasing the pivotal men at the end of October, and the names of the pivotal men required by the different employers were only just beginning to come in now. We had suffered from endeavouring to keep down the peace atmosphere of the nation until the armistice was signed.

(At this point the Adjutant-General entered.)

The Adjutant-General said that since the 11th November 50,000 men had been demobilised in this country and in France. In addition to this number 50,000 prisoners of war had been dealt with at the dispersal centres. The armistice had come very
suddenly, and the civilian and military demobilisation Departments had consequently not been immediately prepared to commence demobilisation. An immense amount of work was necessary before the dispersal stations could be opened, and he considered that the Demobilisation Department had done exceptionally well in passing so many men through their machinery in the last three weeks. The dispersal stations would be opened on the 9th instant, and demobilisation would then proceed with greatly increased rapidity.

In reply to a question, the Adjutant-General said that out of 150,000 miners in the army, 15,825 had been demobilised since the 11th November. The reason why the men were being released slowly was that it took time to find out the names of the men to be demobilised and to get them out of the ranks. Another great difficulty was transport. Marshal Foch had issued an order restricting the use of rolling-stock. He thought, however, that by the 15th of this month they would be able to work up to demobilising 5,000 miners a day.

The Prime Minister said that during the crisis in March of this year we had been able to ship over to France vast numbers of men in a very short space of time, and it should be possible to demobilise men at a much quicker rate than we were doing at present. He was afraid that the people in France were placing obstacles in the way of releasing the men.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Demobilisation Committee should have authority to deal with the question, and should have full powers to give orders on behalf of the War Cabinet.

Out-of-Work Donation.

7. General Smuts stated that the Demobilisation Committee had that morning discussed the question of an increase to the Out-of-Work Donation. Very strong representations had been made that the present rate was not sufficient. The Committee on Production had approved an increase of 5s. a week to men remaining in industry. This strengthened the case for increasing the unemployment benefit. The Demobilisation Committee had come to the conclusion that a rise in the Out-of-Work Donation was necessary, but they were of opinion that the amount should be determined in consultation with the responsible Labour Organisations in order that they should share with the Government the responsibility.

The War Cabinet decided that—

Subject to the concurrence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, an increase in the Out-of-Work Donation should be given. The amount of such a rise to be determined by the Ministry of Labour in consultation with the responsible Labour Organisations, but that it should not exceed 5s.

Power to Cancel the Issue of Priority Licences.

8. Sir S. Kent said that he hoped some statement would be made by the Government with regard to setting industries upon a Peace basis. At the present moment a good deal of the Labour unrest was due to the fact that manufacturers were timid of manufacturing large stocks until they knew they had a market for them.

Dr. Addison said that he understood that the trade had plenty of orders which they could execute as soon as licences affecting materials were withdrawn.

Mr. Symonds of the Local Government Board said that Sir A. Geddes had nearly completed a new housing scheme. One of the proposals was that the various articles required for houses, such as doors, window frames, &c., should be standardised, and that the Government should buy stock and sell such standardised
articles. Already Local Government Board experts were in negotiation with the manufacturers in regard to this matter.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Demobilisation Committee should be given power to cancel trade licences, when and where they thought fit.

Post War Priorities Committee.

9. It was pointed out that in consequence of the decision recorded in the foregoing minute, the functions hitherto exercised by the Post War Priorities Committee would cease to be operative. It was therefore decided that—

The Post War Priorities Committee should cease to exist, and that its duties and functions should devolve on the Demobilisation Committee.

Service men and the General Election.

10. The War Cabinet had before them a resolution passed by the Naval Parliamentary Committee with regard to Service men and the General Election (Paper G.T.-6406). The resolution read as follows:

That this Committee demand the abolition of all Regulations affecting the Soldier, the Sailor, or the Marine, insomuch as they may place unfair restrictions on him, and that these men may be placed upon the same footing as the civilian during the present Parliamentary Election.

Dr. Macnamara suggested that the following reply should be sent to the Secretary of the Committee:

"Parliament has given the Soldier and Sailor the vote, and the Government of course desire that every facility shall be given to them to exercise the franchise, and to inform themselves how to exercise it with information and knowledge. To this end it has been decided that N.C.O's and men may attend political meetings in uniform. But if they wish to stand as candidates, act as agents, speak in public, or in any other way take an active part in the prosecution of any candidature, they must do so not in uniform. The request in your letter, that the decision of the Admiralty weekly order, namely, that favourable consideration shall be given to the request of any man for permission to wear private clothes, shall be made the rule for all the Services, is agreed."

The War Cabinet approved of the above letter, and instructed the Secretary to communicate it to the Secretary of the Naval Parliamentary Committee.

Processions of Munition Workers in Whitehall.

11. The War Cabinet approved of the instructions which the Home Secretary had issued to the Commissioner of Police with regard to Processions of Munition Workers. According to these instructions, while the crowding of Richmond Terrace and Downing Street was to be prohibited, deputations which Ministers or Officials had consented to receive might pass. No endeavour was to be made to prevent orderly processions in Whitehall, but any attempt to hold meetings there should be suppressed.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W. 1, December 6, 1918.