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SECRET.

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WAR CABINET 551.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Tuesday, March 25, 1919, 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. SIR E. GEDDES, G.C.B.,
G.B.E., M.P.

The Right Hon. A. CHAMBERLAIN, M.P.

The following were also present :

The Right Hon. SIR A. C. GEDDES,
K.C.B., M.P., Minister of Reconstruc-
tion and National Service.

The Right Hon. SIR R. S. HORNE, K.B.E.,
K.C., M.P., Minister of Labour.

Mr. THOMAS JONES, *Acting Secretary*.

Captain L. F. BURGIS, *Assistant Secretary*

Mr. G. M. EVANS, *Assistant Secretary*.

The Labour
Situation :
The Miners'
Demands.

1. With reference to War Cabinet 548, Minute 1, Mr. Bonar Law said that he would give to the War Cabinet an outline of what he proposed, with their approval, to say to the miners that afternoon. The miners had intimated that they would strike, unless the Government gave concessions beyond the Sankey Report. The question they pressed most was the one of hours, and they wished to reduce the working hours from eight to seven in July, and to six, unconditionally, in July 1920. He proposed to say that the Government could not go beyond the Sankey Report, but that if there were any points which required interpretation the Government would be quite willing to submit these points to Mr. Justice Sankey and accept his ruling. Mr. Bonar Law added that he had written to the Prime Minister and had informed him of what he proposed to say.

The Minister of Labour said that the Sankey Report recommended that the six hours should come into operation in July 1921, subject to the economic condition of the industry at that time.

Sir Auckland Geddes said that he understood that at a meeting of the Miners' Federation the extremists had attacked Mr. Smillie. There was a sharp cleavage in the Federation between the extremists and those that were led by Mr. Smillie, but he (Sir Auckland) was

told that Mr. Smillie would carry the day provided he thought that the Government had made all the concessions they possibly could.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said the Government had really no choice, that their only possible firm standing-ground was the Sankey Report, and that they should undertake to accept it as it stood, both in spirit and in letter. Should there be interpretation needed on certain points, these points, as had been suggested, could be referred to Mr. Justice Sankey, and his ruling accepted. Once the Government began to modify the Report, they would be left with no answer to the owners and users of coal, or to the miners themselves if the miners said that the modifications were not sufficient. The Report was signed by impartial men, and it had generally been recognised throughout the country that the concessions in it were very reasonable.

Mr. Bonar Law said that, once a debate started on the Sankey Report, certain sections of the community might think that too much had been given away. With regard to the question of nationalisation, the miners might say to him that the Report on this matter was promised in two months' time, and might ask whether the Government would guarantee to carry out the recommendations of the Report. He did not himself see how he could give such a promise, and he thought he should tell the miners that the question must first be considered by the House of Commons.

Lord Curzon said that there were three phases:—

(i.) The Report. (ii.) Its sympathetic consideration by the Government. (iii.) The views of the House of Commons.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that, in reply to a demand from the miners for a guarantee on nationalisation, they might be asked whether, if the Commission recommended nationalisation on terms unduly favourable to the owners and ruinous to the State, the Government were to bind themselves in advance to accept the Report. He assumed that Mr. Justice Sankey, if he reported in favour either of nationalisation or of some form of joint control, would recommend a particular scheme. He hoped the Commission would take evidence on this question from persons other than coal-owners and miners, so that the effect of nationalisation on the City might be represented.

The War Cabinet concurred in the statement Mr. Bonar Law proposed to make to the miners the same afternoon.

Amendment to the
Military Service
Act.

2. The Minister of Labour asked what was to be the Government's policy with regard to an amendment to the Military Service Act, in the name of Mr. J. M. Hogge, which was due to come up in the House of Commons that afternoon. The amendment raised the whole question of running the various civilian services by military labour in the event of a strike. He was of opinion that the amendment should be opposed, though this would be difficult without raising trouble.

It was generally agreed that the amendment was one which the Government would require to oppose, but, owing to the industrial situation, it was most inopportune to raise a discussion on the question.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Minister of Reconstruction should endeavour to postpone the discussion on the Military Service Act in the House of Commons.

German Prisoners
of War employed
in this Country.

3. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Minister of Reconstruction relating to the state of trade and employment in Sussex (Paper G.T.-7022).

Sir Eric Geddes said that, with regard to the employment of German prisoners mentioned in the Memorandum, it had been decided by a Conference of Ministers, held on the 16th January, 1919 (D.M.-58, 4th Minutes), that all prisoners of war, other than those employed in agriculture, ironstone mines, and timber supply, should be returned to France at the earliest possible moment, and British labour returned in their place.

The War Cabinet decided that—

- (a.) The Acting Secretary should ascertain from the War Office how far this decision had been carried out;
- (b.) The Acting Secretary should enquire of the President of the Board of Agriculture if there was any prospect of an early release of the prisoners of war employed under the auspices of his Department.

Parliamentary
Elections (Soldiers)
Draft Bill.

4. The War Cabinet took note of the Parliamentary Elections (Soldiers) Draft Bill (Paper G.T.-7017).

Use of Troops
during the
threatened Strike.

5. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Home Secretary (Paper G.T.-6997) regarding the use of troops during the threatened strike, which had been under consideration on the 19th March, 1919. In his Memorandum the Home Secretary suggested that, if a strike on a large scale now occurred, general authority should be given, as in the railway strike in 1911, for the use of troops in aid of the civil power, and that it should be left to the military authorities to decide, as occasion arose, when and where they should be used, with or without a requisition from the magistrates. He understood that the Secretary of State for War agreed with this view.

The War Cabinet approved the proposals contained in the Memorandum by the Home Secretary.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W. 1,
March 25, 1919.

