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ACTION TO MAINTAIN ELECTRICITY SUPPLIES

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SYSTEM

The Appendix summarises the size and location of the Northern Ireland electricity system. Under normal working a maximum demand of 750-850 megawatts can be expected in May (of which non-domestic use might account for up to some 400 megawatts). The minimum level at which the system can operate with complete safety (ie without danger of collapse) is now between 350 and 450 megawatts depending on the nature of the load.

2. The UWC strike experience suggests that in favourable circumstances it might be possible to continue for a short time at a lower level; but the NIES consider it prudent to assume, for planning purposes, that below 350/450 megawatts of output immediate steps should be taken to close down the system.

3. This minimum level of generation could be maintained with only one power station - Ballylumford - in operation. This would produce technical difficulties in supplying the outlying areas - in particular Londonderry - and, whilst these are not insuperable, the most satisfactory system for even limited operation would include some output from Coolkeeragh.

4. It can be assumed that the key facts about the system, and the minimum level of safe operation, are known to the strike leaders and will have been taken into account in laying their plans.

ATTITUDES OF THE POWER STATION WORKERS

5. There is no hard information to suggest that there would be support for the strike from any of the power stations. So far Ballylumford has been the most explicit in its rejection, albeit conditional, of the strike. Of all the stations, Belfast West is probably the most likely to follow the strike lead, and is likely to be influenced by any change in the atmosphere on the harbour estate.

6. At Ballylumford the manual workers (NJS staff) have said they

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will operate normally provided industry in general continues to do so, and they have safe passage to and from work. The technical staff (NJB staff) have stated their intention of carrying out normal duties throughout the strike, provided they have safe access and do not have to accept passes such as were given out by the UDA to enable staff to go through their barriers in 1974. They would not work directly with non-NIES staff; what the attitude of staff in one station would be to non-NIES staff (eg Army) in another is not clear. We believe that 'normal duties' would not include substituting for manual workers and would thus in practice be confined to continuing to operate the gas turbine plants, which are already their own responsibility.

PERIOD BEFORE THE STRIKE

7. On present evidence the disposition of the bulk of the workers in the power stations is to continue working normally. But this could be put at risk by three factors:

- (a) apprehensions for their personal safety;
- (b) the significant degree of support for the strike within industry at large;
- (c) misapprehensions of government's intentions about the conditions in which troops would be used in the power stations.

(a) and (b) can be better satisfied by action than by words. The measures being taken by the police to counter intimidation and provide protection should be geared to the need to secure conditions in which those who wish to go to work can do so. There is a strong case, besides, for responding to the specific concerns expressed by the Ballylumford work force. These have been discussed by the NIES management and the police, and what is being done has been conveyed to the workforce through the normal management/union channels.

8. As regards (c), the opportunity to dispel misapprehensions can be taken when management and unions meet formally on Monday to consider the situation in the industry. It is being made clear that whilst contingency plans have been laid by government to keep essential services, including electricity, running, the assumption is that workers will continue normally; government will be doing everything possible to enable them to do so. If workers have difficulty, they should let the Service know, as well as the police; the Service can then concert measures with the Police.

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POSSIBLE COURSES OF DEVELOPMENT OF STRIKE ACTION

9. The most extreme possibility is a co-ordinated massive walkout, or failure to turn up for their shift, by manual workers (NJIC staff) with similar action by the technical grades (NJB staff) designed to close down the system completely. If this were on the cards it is most unlikely that it would happen without adequate warning and co-operation with management to ensure orderly shutdown. There is no evidence that such a plan has been made by the UUAC for immediate implementation, or that it would be capable of implementation in the light of the reported attitudes of the staff, particularly at Ballylumford.

10. A more likely possibility is an attempt to reduce and control the level of output by reduced manning or by refusal to obey management instructions to increase output to meet demand. On present information about the attitude of the power station workers there appears to be no immediate likelihood of overt disobedience; but the probability of widespread absenteeism in the face of intimidation, perhaps building up gradually, must be allowed for. Management might be able to counteract under-manning of shifts by redeployment of available staff, as was done in 1974; but the extent^{to} which this could be done would depend on the numbers of such staff, including the technical staff, and their willingness to go beyond the normal limits of flexibility allowed by negotiated agreements. An even more difficult problem would arise if dissident staff refused orders but attempted to remain in the station - some form of sit-in. Management's power to control the situation would be weakened and there could be increased danger of sabotage to plant.

11. The sabotage threat is difficult to assess. It is fairly easy for one or two knowledgeable people to create a temporary power failure by tripping out machines, or to inflict more permanent damage very quickly by interfering with critical pieces of equipment, lubricants, etc. It has always been a reasonable assumption that the power station workers would not deliberately put major items of plant at risk, knowing the long-term consequences. It is also reasonable to assume that the strike leaders will be well aware of both the possibilities and the dangers. It seems unlikely that deliberate sabotage of major items would be part of the present strike plans -

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except as a threat; but the results of such action would be potentially disastrous, and it is essential for this reason to try to avoid confrontations in which tempers could flare and sabotage attempts ensue.

12. If the strike leaders were successful - by whatever means - in securing the level of support needed to reduce output, they would not have the capacity to control directly the distribution of this output. Continued loyalty by the managerial staff can be assumed and given adequate physical security to conduct the operations distribution would be effected through the NIES main Control Centre at Castlereagh and the three area distribution centres for respectively Belfast (Great Patrick Street) Eastern (Castlereagh Rosepark) and West (Tandragee). The security aspect is absolutely vital, and the possibility of special provision is being discussed between NIES and the Security Forces.

13. In 1974 the strike organisers attempted to secure indirect control by offering to maintain a minimum supply for householders and essential services on condition that industry was not supplied (ie to reinforce the effectiveness of the general strike). This tactic could be tried again. The wholesale disconnection of all major users of electricity is technically possible and, while this would hit a variety of essential services as well as industry and commerce, a hard line attitude might be taken by the strike leaders that most of the really essential services, including hospitals, have emergency generators or alternative sources of heat and light.

14. There are clearly major objections to making a bargain of this kind. Industry in general would be unable to provide work for employees prepared to ignore the general strike call and the prospects for escalation of the strike would greatly increase. Government would be seen to be furthering the aims of the strikers. The crude nature of the close down for all major users would no doubt produce many special cases of hardship which would not be properly alleviated by alternative heating and lighting arrangements.

15. The alternative of a partial reduction in industrial and commercial consumption, which could be required by orders made under the Emergency

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Regulations, would have less severe consequences for employment but would depend for success on the assumption - which would seem at this stage quite unwarrantable - that the leaders of a successful power station strike would be prepared to supply the level of output needed. Adequate enforcement would be impossible, and indeed this option seems so unlikely that it might be discounted.

KEY ELEMENTS IN THE EMERGENCY PLAN

16. Should the strike leaders succeed in gaining support in the power stations - or manage to keep workers away in sufficient numbers - the first critical decision for management will be when there is insufficient output to meet demand. Management then has two broad options, depending on the technical resources available and the policy which it is expected to pursue. One is to attempt to maintain maximum output by using managerial and technical staff as flexibly as possible and within the technical limits allowed by the system to allocate the supply available on a planned basis - eg by rotation load shedding and/or by cutting out some or all of the major electricity users. Even if wholesale disconnection of the latter was ruled out for the reasons discussed above, it would in theory be ^{possible} / at some stage to cut out some of the really large consumers or direct lines (eg Du Pont) in order to maintain a limited supply to the rest.

17. The alternative which, in the absence of Government instructions to the contrary, would be preferred by the NIES would be to run the system down as soon as it became clear that demand could not be met within the normal operation of agreed procedures. This situation could occur if (a) too few men turned up to produce the output needed; or (b) men in the stations refused to obey normal management instructions to raise output. This preference is based on several considerations, the main one from the point of view of the NIES, which would apply particularly in case (b), being the need to demonstrate that the industry can only be operated under management control. It takes into account the fact that technical improvements in the system mean that given the necessary manning the electricity supply could now be restarted from black within one day.

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18. A further consideration is management's ability to operate effective rota load shedding (giving all consumers some electricity on a rotation basis) with much reduced output. A successful operation requires the control and distribution centres to be supported by manual switching by technical staff at points throughout the system. This was achieved in 1974 by voluntary staff working long hours in sometimes potentially dangerous areas.

19. For Government there are overwhelming arguments against the NIES closing down the system until they have exhausted all possible means of preventing it - unless, that is, Ministers wish to confront the strikers immediately with the extreme consequences of their actions and put the onus on them to return to work normally under management instructions to restore the supply. Given the possibility of a similar hard-line attitude by the strikers themselves, this would be a dangerous and ultimately extremely damaging option to pursue. Its immediate effect would be to assist the strikers' objective of closing down all industry.

20. A preferable course would be for the NIES to do everything within their power to maintain supplies; Government should leave it to their discretion to determine precisely what should be attempted, and the point at which they believe it is no longer practicable to maintain a supply without damage to the system. There should be close consultation with Government on the arrangements for distribution, taking into account whatever constraints develop in the ability to operate an acceptable rationing scheme. It is hoped that it will be possible to repeat the 1974 switching exercise. Management would need to leave itself a safety margin to run the system down to cold in a controlled way should their effort to maintain supplies appear on the point of breakdown.

THE ARMY ROLE

21. The plan for involving military service personnel is based on the assumption that the NIES has failed to maintain a supply using its own resources. It provides for sufficient Service personnel with appropriate technical experience to work in the power stations under the technical direction of NIES ^{managerial staff} to produce some 450/550 megawatts. Implementation of the plan depends on the

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availability of the agreed number (some 60) of NIES managerial staff.

22. It would be attractive if this support could be brought in while the system is still running, to provide continuity of supply. However, this is believed to be quite impracticable. Power station workers at both manual and technical levels have made it abundantly clear that they will not work with Service personnel. Attempts to 'take over' a running system would only invite hostile reactions and increase the possibility of sabotage. It would therefore be preferable that Service personnel should only enter the power stations after the system has been run down to cold and the non-co-operating workers are off the site.

23. A key decision for Ministers would be how quickly after this point the operation should commence. From the operational point of view, the sequence of events would be:

- (a) it would be at least the evening of Wednesday 4 May before the MACM personnel could move into the power stations. Unless there had already been consultation with NIES on the detailed deployment of the MACM personnel to the station(s), 12 hours would be required for this purpose.
- (b) On entry of the force into the station(s), about 24 hours would be needed for induction and familiarisation, under the supervision of the managerial staff of NIES. During this period the system could be restarted.
- (c) After this 24 hour period output would be increased ^{taken up a} gradually. Once maximum planned output of 450/550 mw had been/ rational distribution system for the available supply could be determined in the light of the switching capacity problem referred to in paragraph 18.

24. The MACM support plan involves many technical hazards. The NIES remain confident that they would be able to rely on having the necessary managerial staff; but much would depend initially on the technical knowledge and experience of the/ ^{MACM} personnel and on the ability of the security forces to preserve the stations from interference. A prolonged period of operation under conditions expected would create an ever increasing likelihood of breakdown through

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inexperienced working and lack of maintenance. Successful distribution would depend on freedom from major sabotage of lines, transformers and substations, and the ability of the NIES to carry out manual switching. The plan nevertheless offers a reasonable basis for action as a last resort.

PUBLIC INFORMATION POLICY

25. It is important that information about the state of the industry as the strike progresses should be co-ordinated with the government's overall strategy, and any statement on this subject will therefore be made by government only. However practical information which the public will need about individual supplies-eg in the event of planned rota load-shedding - would be given by the NIES.

CONCLUSIONS

26. It is vital that we go into the threatened strike period with clear understanding between the Civil departments concerned, the Services in their planned supporting role, and the NIES, of what each is expecting of the others. The following are matters of special significance, on which an early decision by the Secretary of State is desirable:-

- (a) The Chairman of the NIES should be formally advised of the Government's wish that every possible effort should be made by the NIES to provide the maximum supply possible; the determination of what is ^{technically} possible to be left to the discretion of the Chairman and his senior management (paragraphs 19 and 20).
- (b) The Chairman should also be advised that electricity should as far as possible continue to be supplied for industrial use and that selective withdrawal of industrial supplies should only be resorted to when this is essential to the safety of the system (or following specific instructions from Government).
- (c) All necessary measures should be taken to secure the safety of NIES personnel and facilities and the safe passage of personnel between home and place of work.
- (d) NIES should be encouraged to maintain the best possible lines of communication with staff at all levels and provided by

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Government with whatever information may be relevant to this purpose.

- (e) It should be confirmed that planning should proceed on the assumption that the MACM plan for military support should be set in motion following a complete run-down of the system (paragraph 22).