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FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

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Subject: September 24 Conference on Mine Safety

1. UK Delegation to attend Conference

The Conference on mine safety, called at the decision of the ECSC Council of Ministers following the Marcinelle disaster in Belgium, opens in Luxembourg on September 24, and the High Authority has recently announced that the UK Government has accepted the invitation to take part. The four-man UK delegation will be headed by Mr. A. M. Rake, Under Secretary, Chief of the Safety and Health Division, Ministry of Fuel and Power. The delegation is scheduled to attend the first meeting of the Conference, after which other UK experts will be appointed as the Conference begins discussion of technical questions.

The Mission has been informed by a member of the UK Delegation to the High Authority that the UK representatives will attend the Conference as full participants and not as observers. He added that it is nonetheless clear on all sides that UK participation is unaccompanied by commitments of any kind. In particular, he said, the UK would refrain from putting forward any concrete proposals of its own and no doubt refrain as well from associating itself with any general proposals that the Conference would request the High Authority to transmit to the ECSC Council of Ministers. The UK representative described the UK role as one of "assisting and steering the Conference along useful lines" in discussion of a subject in which the UK was highly interested.

2. Organization of Conference

The Conference is now expected to be presided over jointly by Messrs. Finet and Daum, Members of the High Authority. Preliminary talks are already underway between the High Authority and the ILO on the organization of the Conference.

At the September 6 session of the ECSC Council of Ministers, it was decided that national delegations to the Conference would consist of eight governmental representatives, four labor representatives and four management representatives; or a smaller number of delegates at the discretion of each Government but respecting the above ratio of two-one-one. (According to the High Authority, this is the weighting used by the ILO for national delegations.)


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According to a High Authority official, the Conference will no doubt immediately form a number of sub-committees that will prepare the proposals to be completed by January 31, 1958. However, this official questions whether the Conference will be able to explore the subject of mine safety sufficiently and come up with well thought-out proposals in such a short time.

3. German Views

During a conversation with a member of the German Embassy in Luxembourg who works on CSC questions, he said that whereas the German Government had expressed opposition at the September 6 Council meeting to agreeing to create an international body for mine safety, German consent to have the question discussed at the Conference opening on September 24, was almost tantamount to agreement in principle on the part of the Germans to accept some form of central organization. However, he said, the German position was clearly that the national Governments and national legislation should continue to be sovereign in the choice and enforcement of safety measures in the national mines. Not only was the legislation applicable to mine safety in each country very complex and copious (he said that the Belgian code numbers hundreds of pages), which would mean that solely from the jurists' point of view the task of bringing such legislation into harmony or reconciling present incompatibilities with a system of international control would be enormous, but the variety in the characteristics of the different coal workings in the Community made impossible the general application of uniform safety measures. He concluded that the Germans would have no objection to an organization that would be able to make suggestions to the various Governments for improving safety conditions in the mines, but the German Government could not accept that such recommendations or suggestions be binding upon it.

The German Embassy official said that in his opinion an international organization would be extremely useful, on the other hand, as a sort of clearing house for the exchange of information on new developments in the field of mine safety. All too often, he said, is the coal industry in one country unaware of new and valuable developments for improving safety in the coal basins of a neighboring country. Referring to the Marcinelle disaster, he said that the Germans had arrived on the scene with an instrument for testing the purity of the air in mines that was completely unknown outside Germany and might usefully be employed elsewhere in the Community. An international organization could thus perhaps best serve the cause of mine safety by disseminating information about such new developments, and leaving the actual application of safety measures to the responsibility of the interested national authorities.


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United States Representative