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POSTAL DISPUTE

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

A Committee of Cabinet has discussed further today the situation arising from the Australia-wide stoppage last Friday in the Mail Exchange Branches of the Post Office organised by the Australian Postal Workers' Union, and the further industrial action since taken in the capital city exchanges at the instigation of the A.P.W.U. The Union has taken its action to try to secure its demands regarding the manning of the mechanical letter sorting equipment being installed by the Post Office, capable of performing the task of letter sorting very much more speedily and efficiently than the existing manual methods.

These actions by the Union are in gross and flagrant breach of the undertaking given by its representatives as a vital condition of the terms of settlement on 8th April, 1964, of the Sydney Mail Office dispute of that time. The President of the A.C.T.U., Mr. Monk, the Federal President of the A.P.W.U., Mr. F. Waters, and the Federal Secretary of the A.P.W.U., Mr. G. Slater, all personally signed that agreement. The undertaking given was in the following terms :-

"For their part, the A.C.T.U. and the A.P.W.U. will not support any stoppage of work on any industrial issue in future, but will negotiate and failing agreement, will go to Arbitration. In the event of the men stopping work, the A.C.T.U. and the A.P.W.U. agree that the prescribed penalty provisions of the Act will be appropriately applied."

Mr. Monk has referred to the action of the A.P.W.U. as a repudiation of this agreement. As a signatory to the agreement, he has refused to associate himself with the breaches of an undertaking so clearly given.

The Commonwealth Government takes a most serious view, both of the Union's action in disrupting an essential public service and in violating its undertaking.

Inconvenience and hardship and economic loss are being caused to the public by the bank-up of millions of letters. There are serious delays in the handling of all mails, whether commercial or private, including delays both ways in overseas mails, and interruptions affecting letters to and from servicemen at home and overseas. These all result from the course of action which the Union is pursuing in breach of its pledged word.

Mr. Calwell has stated quite falsely that there has been a continued refusal by the Postmaster-General, Mr. Hulme, to have adequate consultations. There has been no refusal, or failure, or reluctance on the part of Mr. Hulme to confer with the A.C.T.U. and representatives of the A.P.W.U. on matters in dispute. He has already talked with Mr. Monk and the officers of the A.P.W.U. As recently as 29th March, I wrote a personal

letter to Mr. Monk telling him that in the spirit of the 1964 agreement, Mr. Hulme would again confer with Mr. Monk and with the General President, Mr. Waters, and the General Secretary, Mr. Slater, of the A.P.W.U. "to discuss the extent to which the present staff should be employed on the letter sorting machines and related matters." The Union rejected this offer. Without regard to the public convenience or to its own written undertaking, it chose direct action instead.

Following persistent attempts to secure agreement by negotiation, the Public Service Board and the Post Office have, in a further attempt to remedy the situation, invoked the Arbitration process contemplated under the 1964 agreement. Application has been made to the Public Service Arbitrator, Mr. E.A. Chambers. Mr. Chambers has written to the A.P.W.U., the Federated Public Service Assistants' Association, the Director-General of Posts and Telegraphs, and the Public Service Board, referring to the great public importance of maintaining the normal flow of the mails, and also to the specific agreement by the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union and the A.C.T.U. to have recourse to arbitration. He is convening a conference for 3 p.m. on Wednesday, 6th April, to resolve outstanding issues raised by the applications.

The Government looks to all participating in the conference with Mr. Chambers to produce a basis for an immediate resumption of normal operations. There is a duty to all sections of the community to achieve this. Quite patently, no responsible government can tolerate continuing interference with the effective performance of the postal service.

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CANBERRA,

5th April, 1966.