

EXCLUSIVE: SDP leader warns against 'shabby deal' on pit strike

WE CANNOT CAVE IN TO SCARGILL

SOCIAL DEMOCRAT leader Dr David Owen today hands out his toughest warning yet against any cave-in to Arthur Scargill's striking miners.

As both sides in the bitter coal dispute gather in Scotland for their crunch meeting, Dr Owen blasts: "Anything which allows Mr Scargill to claim victory must be rejected."

He says: "It would deliver a devastating blow to law and order in this country as well as help to destroy moderation within the trade union movement."

It is the growing suspicion that a phoney deal may yet be cobbled together to break the deadlock which most worries the SDP leader.

In an exclusive interview he said: "The miners' strike is critically poised between a ghastly fudge and a damaging continuation for some more months."

Form

But he warned: "If the working miner goes home tomorrow evening and sees on his television Mr Scargill beaming from ear to ear, saying he has a settlement which justifies the strike, then we are heading for enormous trouble."

Dr Owen said: "The



DAVID OWEN

TALKS TO PAUL POTTS

POLITICAL EDITOR

temptation now to give in, to come up with a form of words that mean all things to all men, must be tremendous.

"I detect the re-appearance of our old friend Mr Solomon Binding" — a reference to the discredited solemn and binding agreement reached between former Premier Harold Wilson and the unions.

Dr Owen said: "The consequences would be colossal. Another strike in two years' time on the meaning of the compromise — but without massive coal stocks and at a time of Mr Scargill's choosing.

"Even more of a disaster would be to let the tactics of violence and intimidation triumph.

"This simply must not happen. There is no way we can enter that sort of squalid political compromise if only for the consequences for law and order.

"There would also be dire consequences for the 55,000 people who are working on.

"They would then be the first ones queuing up for redundancy money. It would be intolerable for them to carry on working in the industry."

He stressed: "The Government has an absolute obligation to these people."

Throughout the long dispute Dr Owen has consistently campaigned against any surrender to Mr Scargill, and he explained why the miners' leader might yet be happy to accept defeat.

Anger

He said: "Mr Scargill was for many years a member of the Communist Party, though now a member of the Labour Party, and he has never made any secret of his wish for political upheaval.

"He would claim tremendous gains from the strike. A lot of young people have been politically converted.

"They are totally anti-police and some are ready to rip up society.

He would also be secure in the knowledge that when pits did close there would be ill - feeling and anger which proved him right to resist."

The SDP leader warned against underestimating Scargill.

"He is very able, bright as a button and knows every trick in the game. It would be dangerous to ignore his merits."

Dr Owen was not quite so generous about the other characters caught up in Britain's worst industrial strike since the war.

On Coal Board boss Ian MacGregor he said: "It was a political mistake in the first place to appoint him — a provocative move which gave Mr Scargill his excuse.

Crisis

"I am never in favour of sacking people in the midst of a crisis, that is simply scapegoating. But he must change his style and presentation.

"He has got to stop coming down into the gutter to exchange insults with Mr Scargill. It's time the NCB got its act together."

Dr Owen was equally critical of the Coal Board for allowing outsiders to get involved last week in the peace process.

He said: "It is giving the appearance of losing control. The NCB should never have allowed these outside people, whether they were newspaper proprietors or Labour politicians, to become publically involved."

He then turned his fire on the Government and attacked Premier Margaret Thatcher for being insensitive to the plight of the jobless.

"I suspect she is kicking herself for being persuaded against using the civil law against the secondary pickets, particularly when the British Steel Corporation wanted to act but was stopped by Whitehall.

"I suspect she is also fed up with watching the NCB losing the propaganda battle. I think she has shown a lack



BITTER ENEMIES: "MacGregor must stop swapping insults with Scargill"

of judgement, and inability to know when to give a little and when to stand firm."

After demolishing his opponents Dr Owen went on to urge the early recall of Parliament to approve his proposals for "trigger ballots" to stop strikes.

Under his party's plan an independent figure such as the Trade Unions' Certification Officer could order a strike ballot if a significant group of workers demanded it.

Dr Owen is convinced the change could be approved by Parliament

before the end of the month.

"I have no doubt the ballot would be won and miners would return to work.

"If it was not, then at least we would know that Mr Scargill was speaking for the majority of his members."

Victory for violence out of the question