

Scargill urged strike in '83

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by Martin Kettle

FRESH evidence of Arthur Scargill's determination to call a national coal strike without balloting his union members has been given to The Sunday Times. It reveals that a year before the present strike began, Scargill pressed unsuccessfully for the miners' executive committee to declare an official national stoppage, in a move which would have been unlawful according to last month's High Court ruling.

The National Union of Mineworkers and Scargill currently face combined fines of £201,000 for contempt of court in defying the ruling that a national strike without a ballot is both unlawful and a breach of the union's rules.

The new evidence is in private minutes of a meeting on March 4 last year of the executive committee of the Barnsley-based Colliery Officials and Staffs Association, which has the status of an area within the miners' union. At this meeting, the Cosa secretary, Trevor Bell, gave a report on the meeting of the previous day, March 3, of the full NUM executive, of which Bell is a member. His report covered the executive's response to the local strike in the South Wales area against the closure of Lewis Merthyr colliery.

The minutes of Bell's report say: "An emergency meeting of the national executive committee was convened on Thursday, March 3, and the national president [Scargill] had called the national executive committee together to obtain its endorsement for all-out national action in support of the strike already taking place in the South Wales area. It was felt that there was evidence of enough support in the rest of the coalfields to warrant the national executive committee using Rule 41 to call a national strike without a ballot under Rule 43. However, this view was not supported by a majority of the committee members who, during the debate, clearly indicated fears that a fragmented union would not be united again."

The union's rule 41 gives the national executive power to authorise stoppages at area level. Rule 43 says that a national strike can take place only after a ballot of members. In the event, the union went ahead with a ballot on the Lewis Merthyr closure strike, which was rejected.

Legal experts who have studied the Cosa minutes say that this shows that Scargill's action this year in trying to declare a series of area stoppages as an official national strike was a long-held plan and that the tactic of avoiding a ballot was very much Scargill's.