

56,000 miners to strike over closure of pits

● Yorkshire's 56,000 miners have been called out on strike from Monday to protest at the closure of two pits near Barnsley and Rotherham

● A manager was injured by a stone thrown from a picket line at Yorkshire Main Colliery during an attempt to relieve a maintenance crew

● Mr Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman, will meet the National Union of Mineworkers' executive today to appeal for an end to their overtime ban.

● A select committee has criticized the board and Department of Energy for their reaction to a growth in claims for subsidence damage to buildings, page 2

By David Felton, Labour Correspondent

About 29,000 miners were idle yesterday, mainly in Yorkshire, where union leaders called an all-out strike from Monday to protest at pit closures. The dispute could spread to other coalfields.

At the centre of a series of walkouts and lay-offs was a dispute at Yorkshire Main Colliery, near Doncaster, where stones were thrown at a management team trying to relieve a maintenance crew which had been down the pit for several hours.

After the pickets refused to lift their blockade, the National Coal Board took the extraordinary step of announcing that it had abandoned the pit.

However, late last night that decision was reversed after negotiations between management and local union officials led to a maintenance team entering the pit to control gas emissions, which the board said threatened the pit's future and jobs of 1,400 miners.

The worsening of industrial relations came on the eve of today's meeting between the unions and Mr Ian MacGregor, coal board chairman, when the board is expected to call for further reductions in capacity leading to more pit closures.

Afterwards Mr MacGregor is to meet the National Union of Mineworkers' executive when he will call for an end to their four-month overtime ban, which he said yesterday was "seriously jeopardizing" the industry's future.

The coal board said Yorkshire Main's deputy engineer was hit in the face yesterday morning by a stone thrown from the picket line. He needed three stitches.

Mr MacGregor, who was attending a Coal Industry Society lunch in London, said outbreaks of violence in the industry were "rather sad because they indicate there are problems within the union that are not being dealt with by the people who run the union."

He insisted that the 5.2 per cent pay offer would not be increased and suggested that the NUM should ballot members on offer. There was serious damage being done to the industry and miners had lost almost £70m in wages from the ban, he said.

Mr MacGregor intends to threaten to withdraw backdating of the 5.2 per cent offer to November in the hope of persuading moderates on the executive to push for an early ballot, but there are few indications that this strategy will succeed.

Lancashire area union officials will press for a tightening up or increase of the action because of the prospect of the closure of two pits in the area. Yorkshire miners will argue that their strike on Monday should be made official when the executive meets in Sheffield on Thursday.

The Yorkshire area council decided to call out all 56,000 miners over the closure in April of Cortonwood Colliery, near Rotherham and Bulcliffe Wood pit, near Barnsley. Mr Jack Taylor, area president, said they would call for other coalfields to join the strike and appeal to other unions for support.

"We intend to stop them butchering our industry and our jobs. Cortonwood is being closed on economic grounds, but it has the best coal in south

Yorkshire and has at least five years life left.

"We have always said that if they close a Yorkshire pit on economic grounds, we will take action," Mr Taylor said.

About 20,000 miners were idle in Yorkshire yesterday, with 9,000 on strike; 4,000 laid off because of the closures; 4,000 laid off because of the strike and 6,500 not able to work because of the national overtime ban's effects.

Nationally, a further 9,000 miners were unable to work as essential maintenance work, which could not be done over the weekend, was carried out. Mr MacGregor said that the ban was having little effect on coal stocks at power stations but was persuading other customers to look abroad for supplies.

He said that the industry would need a deficit grant from the Government of £600m at the end of this month and could not afford an increased offer.

Today's meeting of the Joint Policy Advisory Committee is being held in the hope of finding sufficient agreement between the three unions and the board to allow a joint approach to the Government. Mr MacGregor is expected to say that a reduction in capacity of about four million tonnes to about 100 million would have to be pushed through in the next year.

It is thought unlikely that Mr MacGregor will threaten to cancel backdating of the offer today. But there is little doubt that his message will be gloomy.

Mr Arthur Scargill, NUM president, will maintain that further contraction of the

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industry proves his claim that Mr MacGregor has a plan to close up to 70 pits.

In view of the worsening situation in Yorkshire and the demands for action over the Lancashire pits, the NUM executive will be under strong pressure on Thursday to step up industrial action. Mr Scargill and his supporters have been reluctant to do this because they believe the overtime ban is effective.

The recent statements from Mr MacGregor on the seriousness of the situation would seem to suggest that the action is beginning to bite into coal board finances

Last week, Mr MacGregor was knocked to the ground and badly shaken during a protest by miners at Ellington Colliery.

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