

Coal strike threat spreads as NCB insists on closures

By David Felton, Labour Correspondent

A rising tide of coalfield militancy was predicted last night by union leaders after a call for Scottish miners to join those in Yorkshire, who have threatened an all-out strike next week against pit closures.

Against a background of increasing unrest in the industry and the prospect of other areas joining the strikes in a "domino effect", Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the National Coal Board, confirmed that the closure programme will continue apace as around 20 pits close and 20,000 jobs disappear over the next 12 months.

Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) described the board's proposals as "savage butchery" and added: "We will take all action to defend our members' interests; make no mistake about that."

A clearer indication of the strategy being adopted by militants in the union came from Mr Michael McGahey, Communist president of the Scottish miners, who said: "I want to make it clear that we are not dealing with niceties here. We shall not be constitutionalized out of a defence of our jobs. Area by area will decide, and in my opinion it will have a domino effect."

He was referring to the NUM rule book, which specifies that the national executive, which is meeting tomorrow in Sheffield needs a 55 percent majority in a ballot of members before it can call a national strike. Equally coalfield areas cannot call strikes without the approval of the national executive.

Yorkshire and Scottish representatives on the executive will go to tomorrow's meeting calling for support for their strikes. This is likely to be given, although the statement of support will fall short of any national endorsement that could require a ballot.

The coalfields that will be hardest hit in the closure programme over the next year in addition to Scotland will be the North-east, South Wales and South Nottinghamshire, and militants will be hoping that these areas will now swing behind the lead given by Yorkshire and Scotland to create a national tide of opposition.

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Mr MacGregor said: "I am afraid that if we do have a strike it will do enormous damage. It is rather sad to see people in the industry advertising to would-be customers that they are not a reliable source of energy."

He referred to the next batch of closures as being of the same order as had taken place in the financial year just ending when 23 pits were either closed or merged and around 20,000 jobs disappeared from the industry.

The chairman hoped that the planned reduction of annual capacity from 101.4m to 97.4m tonnes would produce "a baseline" below which production would not need to fall further. He pointed out that capital investment next year was going to be about £800m, to guarantee an industry capable

of producing 100m tonnes of coal a year.

The miners' overtime ban, now in its fifth month, has cost about £135m, so far and although the board claims the action has had little impact on stocks held at pitheads and power stations there has been a substantial reduction in coal for domestic use, which could be replaced by higher imports.

Although Mr MacGregor described next year's cutback as "modest", Mr Scargill reacted angrily after being formally given the proposals at a Coal Industry National Consultative Council meeting.

He said it was clear that Mr MacGregor's aim was a coal industry with 100 pits, instead of the present 171, employing 100,000 workers compared with the present 184,000.

He said the proposed cut was greater than had been admitted. Between 20 and 40 pits could be at risk.

He and Mr McGahey pressed Mr MacGregor during the meeting for a guarantee that there would be no compulsory redundancies, but the coal board chairman would not give one. The full NUM executive met Mr MacGregor after the consultative council meeting and will discuss the implications of the board's strategy again tomorrow.

All 15 pits in South Yorkshire were at a standstill yesterday, with 14,000 miners involved in the spreading strike there over a series of unrelated issues including pit closures and changes in shift patterns.

Scots join Yorkshire protest

From Ronald Faux, Edinburgh

The Scottish executive of the NUM voted yesterday for a strike from Friday night, in protest at the closure of Scottish pits and the "provocative and bullying" tactics of the coal board.

The decision, announced by Mr George Bolton, Scottish vice-president of the union was supported by the Scottish Colliery Enginemens, Boilermens and Tradesmen's Association.

Tension among the 14,000 miners and craftsmen in the Scottish coalfield has been growing in recent weeks and the decision in Yorkshire for a strike from Monday swung the balance at yesterday's meeting.

After six pit closures in the Scottish area in the past 18 months, with the loss of 4,000 jobs, only 10 pits remain north of the border.

The Scottish miners seemed undeterred by high coal stocks, the approach of spring and the possibility of a lengthy and damaging strike. Mr Bolton said: "We are joining ranks with Yorkshire and with miners elsewhere in this essential battle to save the coal industry".

The mineworkers' "triple alliance" partners in the steel and transport industries have promised that the import and

movement of coal will be halted while the strike lasts.

Central to the strike action is the fear among miners that the coal board is planning to shut all but four or five Scottish pits within the next five years. At pithead meetings a month ago, the miners gave their union executive "absolute power" to call whatever action it deemed necessary to answer the threat to the coalfields.

Mr Bolton said that the decision to strike in the Scottish coalfield had been delayed because they would have been acting alone. That no longer applied.

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