

Militant picketing spreads coal strike to 100 pits

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Militant picketing at pitheads in South Wales and Scotland yesterday brought out on strike more than half of the coal industry's labour force as Yorkshire miners began an indefinite stoppage.

National Coal Board officials calculated last night that 99 pits employing more than 96,000 men were at a standstill as left-wing union leaders urged sympathetic industrial action, despite reservations among the men.

Later, Harwood Colliery in Nottinghamshire was closed after pickets arrived from Yorkshire.

As the strike in Yorkshire over the proposed closure of Cortonwood and Bullcliffe Wood collieries started, the NCB said that South Wales pitmen had been "picketed out" by miners defying a vote to continue working.

Only three of the 28 Welsh pits were working. The 10 pits in Scotland were idle.

Swift support came from the Transport and General Workers' Union executive council which called on members not to move coal to power stations and other stockpiling establishments which could weaken the National Union of Mineworkers' position.

Mr Ian MacGregor, NCB chairman, will not visit pits during the strike for fear of exacerbating the situation. But on a visit to management in the North-east, he gave a warning that a prolonged stoppage

would probably accelerate pit closures.

"The strike impact has been much less than forecast. I'm gratified that so many employees understand the situation, and I am impressed that despite the rhetoric of the last few days, and the attempt to whip up excitement, we see very minimal support in some areas."

The stoppage spread most rapidly to Scotland, South Wales, Kent and Durham from Yorkshire, the biggest coalfield, where all 53 pits were idle yesterday and 56,000 men on strike. Some Yorkshire miners disobeyed leaders' appeals to

stay in their area and tried to picket in North Nottinghamshire, though with little effect.

The board and NUM leaders are looking anxiously at the coalfields holding ballots on the strike recommendation.

The Midlands men vote tomorrow and in Lancashire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire over the following two days.

If the vote is "no", there will be pressure on left-wing NUM leaders to call a special executive committee meeting at which a national pithead ballot can be ordered.

While the strike intensifies, Mr MacGregor said that if pickets threatened or intimidated staff engaged in vital

safety work, further closures could follow. "I think the NUM are not interested in saving their pits from flooding or gas problems and they should not look to the management to solve these things."

"I have told colleagues in management that while we appreciate the enormous efforts they have put in recently, under no circumstances should their safety be put at risk. If these people are threatened, and the pit is sacrificed in the process, then that is what will happen."

The coal board plans to close four million tonnes of capacity in the next financial year, involving the closure of up to 20 pits employing 20,000 men. The cutbacks in Yorkshire represent the first stage in this plan to bring mining capacity into line with reduced demand.

Mr Jack Taylor, president of the Yorkshire NUM, appealed to his members to continue the "responsible and disciplined approach" of restricting picketing to their own coalfield, while asking miners in other areas to follow their "magnificent lead".

Over the border in Derbyshire, the acting area secretary, Mr Gordon Butler, disclosed that 11,500 men would be recommended to strike in a ballot on Friday and asked the Yorkshire "flying pickets" to stay away in the meantime.

Determined picketing was blamed by the coal board last night for rapid escalation of the stoppage in South Wales and Scotland.

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Scuffles as illegal protesters close Nottinghamshire mine

By Staff Reporters

Fights and scuffles broke out last night as miners from a Nottinghamshire pit protested at the closure of their mine by 300 "flying pickets" from Yorkshire.

The illegal picket was in defiance of an instruction from union leaders not to demonstrate at the Harworth mine in north Nottinghamshire, the only one in the county to be picketed.

About 150 police attempted to keep the pit open, but the local branch of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) decided to advise their members not to cross the picket lines.

The 29,000 members of the Nottinghamshire area of the NUM are scheduled to vote on Thursday and Friday on whether to join the stoppage.

Work in the Scottish coalfield came to a standstill yesterday after pickets closed the last three pits where miners had defied their union's strike call and had turned up to work.

Mr Peter Walker, the Secretary of State for Energy, rejected calls yesterday to intervene in the dispute over pit closures and said that the response to the strike had shown that miners wanted a secret ballot to express their views.

During clashes in the Commons he said that he would not interfere in a management decision to invest more in economic mines and to cut the burden of uneconomic pits in a "civilized and generous way".

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At Bilston Glen colliery near Edinburgh, the largest pit in Scotland, tempers flared as miners left after working the early shift and others arrived prepared to work. Many changed their minds at the prospect of running a gauntlet of about 300 strikers.

The National Coal Board in Scotland said that 70 men had gone through into Bilston Glen

of the 400 who would normally have been working on the back shift. But there would be no production from the pit and with news that Barony and Tilloch collieries had stopped production, it was clear that all 10 pits in Scotland had ceased work.

In South Wales, coal board officials and union leaders were locked in a battle for the loyalty of the miners. There were bitter exchanges at the St John's Colliery, Maesteg, as 12 pickets from the Tower Pit, described officially as lobbyists, persuaded men on the morning shift buses to turn back.

Although men at 18 of the 28 pits had decided to ignore the strike call, the pickets persuaded half of them to join in the action. Work at the nine other pits proceeded normally.

The union, claimed that by the afternoon fewer than 300 men were working at seven pits. Renewing the call yesterday Mr Emlyn Williams president said he expected the coalfield to be at a complete standstill today.

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