

## Which side will crack first in the miners' dispute? Paul Routledge reports

The unions are back at an unhappily familiar crossroads today. One way lies serious conflict with the new labour laws and a high risk of defeat; the other route offers certain humiliation at the hands of the Government and the National Coal Board.

The railway unions, the seamen and transport workers, by widening the mining industry strike into a dispute over Cabinet policy towards the nationalized industries as a whole, have made clear which road they want to travel: all-out confrontation, with a total blockade of coal and coke throughout the country.

The miners and their allies appear to be forming themselves into a "provisional" wing of the labour movement, leaving the "official" TUC on the sidelines in a guerrilla struggle with the State. It is a development that privately alarms some top figures in the TUC general council, one of whom said yesterday: "The trouble is that if Aurthur Scargill wins, it is a victory for the National Union of Mineworkers, if he loses, it is a defeat for all of us. That is something we must be very conscious of."

Relationships between the TUC and the NUM are still strained. The union has formally told Congress House that it does not seek assistance, and last week's bland statement from the general council carefully avoided expressing support for the pitman's secondary picketing. But with 130,000 men on strike and the threat of widespread lay-offs in other industries, the TUC cannot stand aloof for much longer.

One view among the elder statesmen is that Mr Scargill and his 24-man executive should be summoned to meet the TUC's "inner cabinet" for a good talking-to. So far, this approach has not found favour. The TUC is itself divided at present and not in a strong position to give a lead; either to tell the miners to go back, or to issue general advice to the movement not to cross NUM picket lines. That was the most practical help the TUC rendered in the big strikes of the early 1970s, but it is most unlikely to be offered now on - the grounds that it could embroil the TUC in unlawful activity.

The TUC is split because the substantial and irreversible shift in the balance of power on the general council towards the moderates seven months ago has not produced the "new realism" that many expected.



Confrontation at the colliery: a "provisional" wing of the Labour movement now wants to widen the protests

# Unions at the abyss

In the wake of the Govt's enforced de-unionization at Cheltenham GCHQ, Len Murray, the general secretary, has seen his authority undermined - most obviously by the general council's refusal to end a boycott of the National Economic Development Council. He is by no means the lameduck leader that some of his left-wing critics would wish him to be, but his own weakened position and the dividend nature of the general council make it less likely that early intervention from this quarter will be successful.

Meanwhile there is a drift of men back to work in Lancashire and the Midlands, and, paradoxically, a drift towards the barricades on the part of unions supporting the strike. It is a mess that pleases few, certainly not Neil Kinnock; the Labour Party leader has let it be known that he would prefer the NUM to sort out its problems to avoid damaging the party's recovery in the poll.

If not the TUC, who will break the deadlock? The studied silence of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, suggests that the view of its former chairman, Jim Mortimer, still holds good: that it is not the job of Acas to try to sort out a miners' strike. The Government seems happy with the stalemate, expecting the whole dispute to collapse its way, and the coal board is evidently pinning its hopes on a gradual return to work in the moderate areas, leading to a national ballot in which the men reject industrial action.

It is a nice calculation, but will it work? An NOP poll in the *Mail on Sunday* suggests that 51 per cent of the men would vote now for a strike, and only 34 per cent would oppose one. On that showing, the militants need to convince only 4 per cent of the uncommitted to pull the 55 per cent majority for all-out strike as required by the NUM rule book. The present crop of political

obituarists of Mr Scargill may be premature.

That should not come as a total surprise, unless prejudice has finally triumphed over experience. Most big disputes develop logic of their own, and the coal strike is no exception.

The massive police operation, which nobody could have predicted a month ago, has had an impact on the miners' outlook. Perhaps it has not erased the unpleasant memories of Yorkshire flying pickets, but ironically, as the security cordon proves more successful, the very pervasiveness of the police presence is beginning to displace picketing as the locus of the argument. And that shift plays into the hands of the left.

In Yorkshire, where the strike began, there is also some perplexity on the ground as to where the next step for the rank and file should be. The picketing is becoming less and less effective as the police pick off drivers and threaten them with arrest if they move out of the coalfield. By building up a log of the cars being used, the police are gradually immobilizing the militant miners in their home villages. With the strike going into its fourth week, the colliers are finding this experience frustrating, and there is a risk of more impulsive acts.

The situation is volatile; and it is impossible to predict with certainty how it will develop. The miners' national officials are stalling on the moderate coalfields' demand for an emergency executive. In the meantime they must be calculating that the longer they hold off, the more probable it is that the inevitable national ballot will go their way. Some left-wingers are even thinking beyond that stage to a continuing strike in Yorkshire, Scotland and south Wales and other areas, even if there is an overall "no" vote. That is uncharted country, even for them.

The received wisdom is that the miners will comply with the majority view - whatever it is. After all, it is argued, the areas that voted "no" in the 59 per cent, pro-strike ballot of late 1971 stuck loyally with the union. Why, then, should the left ignore a ballot that goes against it? The question will be answered only by events. It was snowing in Yorkshire yesterday, and the pickets thought their prayers for a return of winter weather had been answered. Longer reflection may remind them that snow in April is more common hereabouts than a Thatcher U-turn.

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