

Scargill's strategy suffers blow in steel and pit votes

● Union delegates representing more than 30,000 Nottinghamshire miners rejected by nearly three to one the area executive's call for pitmen not to cross picket lines.

● Leaders of the steelmen's union voted not to join the blockade of coal supplies agreed by transport, shipping and rail union leaders.

● An emergency Commons debate on police action during the miners' dispute will almost certainly be held next Tuesday.

● Despite growing coal board optimism that a solution to the pit strike might be in sight two fewer mines were in production yesterday

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The miners' strike began to lose its cutting edge yesterday when the steel workers voted to abandon their industrial allies and Nottinghamshire pitmen decided to continue working normally.

Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the National Coal Board, urged in a widely syndicated newspaper feature that workers in other industries should respect the "democratically taken decision of those miners who have voted to continue working".

His argument was swiftly echoed in a vote by the national executive of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation to stand aloof from the blockade of coal supplies agreed last week by leaders of the transport, shipping and rail unions. The steel men fear further closures in their industry if coking coal supplies are cut off.

In the Nottinghamshire coalfield, delegates of the National Union of Mineworkers rejected by nearly three to one an area executive recommendation not to cross picket lines, which would have drawn 34,000 men at 25 pits into the "rolling strike", now nearing the end of its fourth week.

Coal board managers privately expressed guarded optimism last night that the bitter

mining dispute was finally going their way. Attention is fixed on next week's critical meeting of the miners' union executive in Sheffield, at which union moderates will press Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the union, for a national ballot.

The board said in a special edition of its *Coal News* journal circulated to 180,000 miners that at least 13 of the 24 members of the union executive are for a secret pithead poll. "That is the only way to end the present bitterness between areas of the union and conflict between groups of the union's members."

But despite the board's growing optimism that a solution to the dispute might be at hand, the number of pits working normally fell yesterday and there were more arrests on the picket lines.

Only 40 mines out of 176 were producing coal as usual on the night shift, a reduction of two on the previous day. There were arrests at a number of sites, including 39 in clashes between pickets and police at Port Talbot steelworks in South Wales.

A meeting of unions involved in the projected blockade of coal movements broke up yesterday without a formal statement, and transport

workers' leaders are to hold further talks in an effort to make their sympathetic industrial action stick.

In Nottinghamshire, however, train drivers are expected to defy instructions from the rail unions, the National Union of Railwaymen and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, to "black" coal movements after the 186-72 vote by miners' union area delegates not to cross their own picket lines. Their lead may be taken up in other areas.

The Nottinghamshire conference vote was not unexpected, but that decision and the steel confederation's refusal to take action in support of the striking miners is expected to raise moderates hopes of an early ballot that could lead to a "no" vote on industrial action.

The coordinating committee of transport unions set up last week to halt the movement of coal into and around the country could be the next victim of diminished enthusiasm for the miners' cause.

The committee met for an hour yesterday at the offices of the National Union of Seamen in London, but union leaders declined to give details.

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Commons set for mines debate

By Julian Haviland, Political Correspondent

The emergency Commons debate on the policing of coalfields during the miners' dispute, for which Labour MPs have been pressing since last week, will almost certainly take place on Tuesday.

Mr Neil Kinnock, leader of the Opposition, said yesterday that concern about infringements of civil liberties (by the police) continued, and if there was "no significant improvement", Mr Gerald Kaufman, Labour's senior home affairs spokesman, would apply on Monday for a three-hour debate the following day.

It would then be for the Speaker, Mr Bernard Weatherill, to decide whether the matter was "proper to be discussed". Mr Weatherill has

already indicated his willingness to allow a debate when he thinks the time is ripe.

Mr Kinnock's words prevented a renewed outbreak of indignation by Labour members representing mining areas, who had for three days pressed Mr Weatherill in vain to allow a debate. Their impatience had been fuelled by Mr Kinnock's earlier refusal to use Opposition time to initiate a debate, for fear that any attack might recoil on Labour.

There is still some nervousness on that score, but by yesterday it was clear to the Labour leadership that pressure for a debate could not prudently be resisted any longer.

The emergency procedure

gives Mr Kaufman an outside chance of concentrating attention on the police; but with the mineworkers national executive due to meet 48 hours later, Conservative backbenchers will try to bring in the wider question of the right to work.

The Labour Party's complaints are likely to be full-blooded. Mr Kaufman and his colleagues now have what they describe as a substantial dossier of complaints about police behaviour.

Mr Kinnock's view is that the intensity of police activity is unprecedented and worrying, and that it is wrong for someone seeking to join a peaceful picket line to be treated as if he is breaching the peace.

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor.

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