

Pit militants back rival strategy to relaunch dispute

● Militant pit leaders are to press for a delegate conference to review the strike and relaunch the pay dispute.
● Dr David Owen has called for an emergency debate on the dispute to stop police conduct becoming a central issue.

● Mr Gerald Kaufman is hoping to confront Mr Leon Brittan in the Commons on policing of the miners dispute.
● Picketing by miners was condemned by the Attorney General as "a grave challenge to the accepted standards of society".

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers who are battling to avoid a secret ballot decided yesterday to back a rival stratagem aimed at continuing the bitter coal industry strike, which enters its fifth week today.

Militant members on the national executive will propose holding a special delegate conference "as soon as possible" to review the situation and, in effect, to relaunch the dispute over pay and pit closures which has set miner against miner.

Secret contacts between leaders of the strike-bound coalfields took place against a background of growing certainty that the moderates will be able to muster a majority for a ballot when the union executive meets in Sheffield on Thursday.

Faced with the risk of a right-wing coup, the left agreed to support the recall of the delegate conference that last autumn imposed the overtime ban from October 30 which grew into the current "rolling strike". Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the union, and his militant colleagues would probably win a clear majority of support from the 240 delegates.

However, it is still not certain that the compromise formula will be approved by the politically divided executive.

Most of the moderates are mandated by their areas to go for nothing less than an early ballot of the men, to be held just before or just after the Easter holiday.

Intense private lobbying of some pro-ballot "waverers," thought to include Mr Billy Stobbs (Durham), Mr Idwal Morgan (cokemen) and Mr Denis Murphy (Northumberland), is expected over the next few days as the left seeks to build a coalition of support for its tactical measure.

Lobbying of a rather different kind is also being planned for the day of the executive meeting. Several hundred striking miners who want the dispute to be made national by the use of "flying pickets" are to converge on the narrow streets leading to the union offices in a 10-storey tower block in the centre of Sheffield. Some moderates are so anxious about the threat of violence that they are arguing for a shift in the venue.

Mr Trevor Bell, secretary of the union's white-collar group, argued last night that if a ballot is not called "there could be a reaction at the grass roots, of people going back to work" in coalfields such as Durham.

If the vote is held on April 19 or 26, he predicted a majority for industrial action

But a fellow moderate, Mr Denis Murphy, said: "It will be tight. If commonsense prevails, it will be a majority in favour of the NUM and against pit closures. I think we will get 55 per cent in Northumberland".

Under the union rule book, a majority of 55 per cent of those taking part in the ballot is required before national industrial action can be sanctioned.

Official backing for the strikes in Scotland, South Wales, Yorkshire, Northumberland, Kent, Durham and parts of Lancashire has been given under a rule that permits approval for local disputes.

It would not be impossible for the recalled delegate conference itself to decide that there ought to be a national ballot, but the militants' backing for that strategy suggests that such a step is unlikely.

More probable is a formula giving overt, national backing for the strikes as they occur, and seeking to widen the disruption both within and outside the industry.

With about 120 of the industry's 176 pits at a standstill, the strike goes into its fifth week with a warning from the National Coal Board that "hopeless" pits would have to close.

Owen presses for debate

By Julian Haviland, Political Editor

Dr David Owen, leader of the Social Democratic Party, in a letter to the Prime Minister, has asked for the Government to arrange a Commons debate on the miners' dispute to prevent the Labour Party focusing attention on the police, and making them scapegoats.

Dr Owen's letter was delivered to Downing Street yesterday as Labour prepared to seek an emergency debate on the methods used by police to control over-zealous picketing by miners and to ensure that miners can go to work if they wish in areas such as Nottinghamshire, where there have been ballots against striking.

He said many would find it extraordinary that a month had passed without a Commons debate on the dispute. Labour was now trying to make police conduct the central issue, but this must not be allowed to happen.

The only way to prevent it would be for the Government to provide time for debate. The country was entitled to hear the Government's plans for the mining industry, "the measures of social adjustment" it proposed, and a considered view of

the various civil liberty issues in the context of calling for a return to work.

Mr Gerald Kaufman, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, is expected to apply in the Commons today for an emergency debate on the policing of the miners' dispute after consulting Mr Neil Kinnock, leader of the Opposition. If the application succeeds, the debate will take place tomorrow with Mr Leon Brittan, the Home Secretary, defending the police and citing examples of intimidatory picketing.

There was a preliminary joust between the two men yesterday. Mr Kaufman said Mr Brittan had dismissed complaints that police had used *agents provocateurs*

on picket lines, without first talking to the Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire, Mr Charles McLaughlan.

Mr Brittan replied that he had consistently said that every complaint should and would be thoroughly investigated. He said this was a diversionary tactic by the Labour Party which was "hideously embarrassed".

Mr Kaufman, who had a 90-minute meeting with Mr McLaughlan on Saturday, said afterwards that he put to him a great many matters of concern expressed to him about policing in the last few weeks.

"I had names, dates and policemen's numbers." He said Mr McLaughlan "in some matters showed considerable concern."

● Picketing by the miners was condemned yesterday by Sir Michael Havers, QC, the Attorney General, as a "grave challenge to the accepted standards of society".

"There is absolutely no justification in present-day English society for the law to be broken for political or self-interested ends", Sir Michael told a course for solicitors in Oxford.



Dr David Owen (left) and Mr Gerald Kaufman.

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor.

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