

Pit package promises higher pay and output for job cuts

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The National Coal Board is preparing a new *Plan for Coal* to end the miners' strike, offering "substantially higher" pay to a smaller workforce and a 25 per cent increase in output by the year 2000.

Elements of the draft package to be discussed with National Union of Mineworkers leaders were disclosed to *The Times* yesterday by Mr Ian MacGregor, coal board chairman.

But the strike looks certain to drag on for at least another month until the mineworkers' delegate conference on July 11-12 after statements yesterday from national union officials that any settlement would have to be approved by that body.

The MacGregor Plan, designed to supersede the 1974 *Plan for Coal*, will propose:

- Annual deep-mined output of 125 to 150 million tonnes a year by 1995/2000, compared with the 1984/85 figure of 100 million tonnes;
- Coal board "recovery of responsibility for managing the industry";
- Continuing consultation with the mining unions;
- "Substantially higher" wages for a smaller workforce;
- Closure of uneconomic pits.

Parts will appeal to union negotiators, who are continuing talks with the coal board this week. But it is clear that the

main stumbling-block of closing pits that are "economically non-viable" remains.

Mr Arthur Scargill, union president, who is described by Mr MacGregor as "a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde character", repeated yesterday his assertion that despite the continuation of secret talks there would be no

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secret deals. Any proposed settlement would have to go before the union's delegate conference.

As the strike goes into its fourteenth week, events in the moderate Nottinghamshire coalfield showed a further swing away from militancy.

Elections for branch office in six pits have unseated men who support the strike in favour of miners who have continued working. One casualty is Mr Gordon Skinner, delegate at Gedling Colliery and brother of the Labour MP for Bolsover, Mr Dennis Skinner.

But attention is expected now to focus on the coal board's strategy for a return to work formula. The union national executive meets in Sheffield on Thursday to hear a progress report, and it seems certain that

negotiators will be given a mandate to continue talking.

Mr MacGregor would not put a timetable on the negotiations but said that the longer the strike lasted the less able the board would be to adhere to its pledge of no compulsory redundancies. "If we end up with 30 pits that are inoperable, then I don't know how we can handle the problem of the people involved."

The union argues that agreement already vouchsafed in the talks for the closure of exhausted pits and other mines experiencing insuperable geological problems should be enough to take care of the four million-tonne reduction in capacity sought by the board in this financial year.

But Mr MacGregor's comments point clearly to a redefined management authority to close "uneconomic" collieries and on this issue the current round of talks may break down. Mr MacGregor wants a more precisely-written *Plan for Coal* giving the board explicit powers to shut down non-viable pits and if he does not get it he gives a warning that the £900m a year investment programme in new capacity would be at risk.

Yesterday, 41 pits were working normally, with 118 strikebound.

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