

# Walker resists pressure to call coal leaders together

## COAL DISPUTE

Mr Peter Walker Secretary of State for Energy, again reaffirmed in the Commons that coal stocks at power stations were sufficient to meet demands for many months. Pressed by Labour MPs at question time to intervene personally in the dispute, he said that the Government had intervened by ensuring that there had been massive investment in the industry and that there was enough money to pay adequate pay increases and redundancy payments.

Since the dispute started, Mr Walker said, miners on strike had lost more than £200m in wages.

Mr Edward Taylor (Southend East, C) said the supply of coal at power stations showed that the strike was pointless and futile. The only result of its continuance (he added) will be a major loss of wages for miners and in the longer term a loss of customers and jobs.

Mr Walker: The miners have lost a substantial amount in wages. The tragedy of the timing of this dispute is that we were being very successful in conquering new markets.

In December 1978 industries applied for grants to go for coal conversion and at present none are applying. This is doing considerable damage to the future prospects of the industry.

Mr James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland, L) asked when the Government would intervene to try to find common ground between the parties to the dispute.

Mr Walker: The Government has already intervened to a considerable extent. It has made enough money available to see that the miners are made a better pay offer than that already accepted by the power and gas workers and that all miners who wish to remain in the industry will be able to do so.

The coal industry has enjoyed for the past five years and will enjoy for the next three years the biggest capital investment programme it has ever had. All that is substantial intervention.

Mr Stefan Terlezki (Cardiff West, C) asked if it was likely that in the end there would be many pits closed than was originally envisaged because of this unnecessary strike.

Mr Walker: I hope the miners will reflect on the range of opportunities and future opportunities available. With the potential conquest of new markets and the rewards of a massive capital investment programme there is a good potential for the future of this industry. At present it is being damaged and harmed. I hope that harm will cease as quickly as possible.

Mr Geoffrey Lofthouse (Pontefract and Castleford, Lab) said there would be no winner and it was time that someone got the parties round the table for talks on realistic arguments from both sides.

Many miners' families were suffering great financial hardship. Does the minister not think (he went on) that he has some responsibility for it, or does he think he can continue to sit on the fence like his boss and get sadistic pleasure out of people being bashed into submission?

Mr Walker said he derived no pleasure from the dispute. That is why (he continued) my colleagues and I decided to make arrangements whereby there was a decent pay offer, massive investment and no need for a single compulsory redundancy.



Wallace: Government must find common ground

As to getting round the table, two of the three miners' unions have been prepared to do that. This coming Wednesday the NUM have another opportunity and I hope they will take advantage of it.

Mr Keith Raffan (Delyn, C): Has he read the article in *The Times* today by Jimmy Reid, a leading figure in

the Labour Party, saying that the way the NUM's annual delegate conference is being used to circumvent a national ballot is equivalent to this House cancelling a general election. If Labour continues to deny the right of democracy to the miners it can never be considered worthy of holding office in this country.

Mr Walker: I have read that article. In fairness to the Leader of the Opposition, the day that Mr Scargill persuaded the delegate conference to change the rules on balloting he came out in favour of having a ballot. In the weeks since then he has not repeated that argument, but I hope that he soon will do so.

Mr Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon, Pl C) said that in view of the great suffering of the miners and their families and the danger to the long-term future of the pits the minister must get stuck in, bring people together and achieve an early solution.

Mr Walker: With a decent pay offer, no need for any compulsory redundancy and a massive investment programme there is no need for them to suffer hardship.

Mr William Walker (Tayside North, C) invited the minister to confirm that since in Scotland there was substantial hydro, oil and nuclear power the coal stocks at Scottish power stations would last indefinitely.

Mr Walker: There are substantial coal stocks at Scottish power stations. It is also true that coal stocks at power stations throughout the UK will last a long time.

Mr Terry Patchett (Barnsley East, Lab) said the dispute was about jobs. Would Mr Walker not fight for his future?

Mr Walker: I realize that. That is why I believe it right for the Government to declare that in the next few years it will invest another £3,000m in new capital investment to see that there is a future for that industry.

Mr Peter Rost (Erewash, C): Would he contrast this Government's attitude to the future of the industry with what is happening under a socialist government in France where high cost pits are being closed and miners made redundant, partly because the nuclear industry has proved much more competitive?

Mr Walker: The French Government was elected on a promise to increase coal production by 50 per cent and has now decided on a programme of reducing it by 50 per cent. It has also decided to reduce the number of miners in France by 50 per cent.

Mr Richard Douglas (Dunfermline West, Lab) said Mr Walker should accept the responsibility of his high office and not sit out the dispute until the power stations were out of coal. This was tragic for industry and for the nation.

Is it not (he continued) in his interest to intervene directly in the dispute and to use the powers of his office to get people around a table to seek a solution in the national interest?

Mr Walker said he used his high office to see that enormous financial provision was made, that there was a decent pay offer and no compulsory redundancies, and that there was record investment in the coal industry.

That is using this high office (he added) to the benefit of the mining industry.

Mr Peter Hardy (Wentworth, Lab) said Mr Walker seemed to be going rather further than the National Coal Board in saying there would be no compulsory redundancies, certainly not within particular coalfields.

While Mr Walker seems to be emphasizing the fact that the Government has intervened (he continued), he is not doing any service to the industry or to his department or to the community at large by flatly refusing to take part in tripartite negotiations.

Mr Walker replied that two mining unions were willing to take part in negotiations. Only one union decided month after month that it would not have such talks.

Mr Michael Morris (Northampton South, C) said one of the saddest things was that Mr Arthur Scargill had forecast that coal stocks would run out and had consistently been proved wrong. Britain was losing trade to Poland and thousands of tonnes of coal were coming in on long-term contracts to the detriment of South Yorkshire and South Wales particularly.

Mr Walker: I do not know of any long-term contracts with the Polish Government so I cannot comment.

It was true that Mr Scargill had said 13 weeks ago that there were only eight weeks of coal stocks at the stations. Two weeks later it was said to be 10 weeks. Six weeks ago the figure was nine weeks. Now it was eight weeks. In fact there were many months of coal stocks available at the power stations.

Mr Roy Mason (Barnsley Central, Lab): How long does Mr Walker intend to stand idly by, watching the mining industry for which he has prime responsibility, crumbling into disrepair? Why does he not invite the chairman of the National Coal Board and the president of the NUM to his office for a discussion on the industry's future. Talks may then ensue which could bring an end to this problem.

Mr Walker said the Government had not stood idly by. It has been far less idle (he added) than the Government of which Mr Mason

was a member, on pay, decent terms for voluntary redundancy, and on capital investment.

Mr Stanley Orme, chief Opposition spokesman on energy: Mr Walker's failure to intervene is a disgrace as the manner in which he and the Prime Minister are hoping for a defeat of the miners, instead of seeing that policy of Mr MacGregor defeated.

Mr Walker could not play his part in discussion and we could work out an energy policy based on growth and expansion.

Mr Walker: If there is any disgrace in this dispute it is a party which urges people to strike when the

Government is investing more, in paying more, and in looking after miners better than they ever did.

Mr Walker said during later questions that the main effect of the dispute was to damage the prospects of individual pits and of the whole industry.

Those on strike had lost more than £200m in wages, and progress in encouraging industry to convert to coal had been stopped.

Sir William van Straubenzee (Wokingham, C) asked if Mr Walker had noted reports of intimidation of wives and families of individual miners. This was abhorrent to most people.

Did Mr Walker have any evidence that this, or any other measures, were reducing the number of miners continuing to work? Mr Walker replied that one could not measure the effect of intimidation on the numbers going to work in any day. But at the end of last week record numbers were working. This morning more miners arrived at the pits than at the same time last week.

Sir John Osborne (Sheffield, Hallam, C): Many people in the coal industry, particularly Yorkshire, did not want to go on strike but were driven out by flying pickets and intimidation. I am waiting for a plea from the Opposition to Mr Scargill to meet the chairman of the NCB with the other two unions on Wednesday.

Mr Walker: I would welcome an endeavour by the Opposition to persuade the NUM to go to those negotiations. Some weeks ago they did urge the holding of a national ballot but there has been no sign of that in recent weeks. Perhaps the Opposition will revert to that policy.

Mr Jack Dormand (Easington, Lab): The attitude of the Government in pretending this dispute has nothing to do with them is simply not seen in the country as the correct stance. Above all, the economy is suffering and Mr Walker has a responsibility for that, together with the Prime Minister and everybody else. Will he not take action before it is too late?

Mr Walker: It is because I consider the coal industry has an important and major future for the economy that I persuaded colleagues to

persuade the finance to have a decent pay offer, no compulsory redundancies and a massive investment programme. I hope Mr Dormand will do more to persuade the NUM that that is what it is all about.

Mr Alister Burt (Bury North, C): The longer this dispute goes on the greater the likelihood of an increase in power prices, again directly attributable to those who have stimulated and preserved the strike. This could threaten the jobs of those employed in energy-intensive industries many of whom would give their eye teeth to have the redundancy terms offered to the miners in recent years.

Mr Walker: In terms of voluntary redundancy, early retirement, capital investment and pay, what has been offered to this industry compared to other industries is generous.

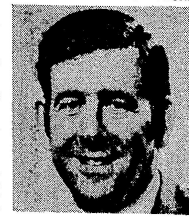
Mr Ian Wrigglesworth (Stockton South, SDP): Some of us feel it is not likely Mr Scargill will enter into realistic negotiations until there is more pressure from his members to do so.

While acknowledging the degree of investment the Government has given to the coal industry, will Mr Walker publish as soon as possible a comprehensive plan for energy generation in which the balance between coal, oil, nuclear and other sources is split out in clearer terms than the Government has so far done.

Mr Walker: We are blessed with a good oil industry, a good gas industry, a nuclear industry and a major coal industry. It would be crazy for any government of this country not to keep fully open all these options and keep them active and successful because they have international as well as national applications.

Mr Orme: Will Mr Walker not use his good offices to invite Mr MacGregor and Mr Scargill this week to his office so these matters can be discussed?

Mr Walker: I suggest Mr Orme also has a meeting with Mr Scargill. I suggest he says to him: "As the NCB and the Government are currently investing twice as much in the industry as we did and are paying miners better than we did, why are you striking?"



Wigley: The minister must get stuck in

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