

Scargill to meet coal board

By Paul Routledge
Labour Editor

Miners' leaders and the National Coal Board are to meet face to face today for the first time since the "rolling strike" started nearly eleven weeks ago. But the prospects of an early settlement look remote.

Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, last night reaffirmed his position that the board must withdraw its plan to shut 20 pits with the loss of 20,000 jobs before the union orders a return to work.

The coal board is also sticking to its guns, insisting that the meeting will review "the overall commercial aspects of the coal industry at the present moment". This would involve union recognition of the need to close down "uneconomic" capacity.

The way for talks was cleared when Kent miners' leaders agreed to withdraw the token picket they have been mounting outside Hobart House, the board's London headquarters, so that the union's executive could take up a long-standing invitation to meet the board.

This meeting is a scheduled discussion normally held every six months. Coal board officials did not expect the miners to turn up, but the routine consultative gathering has taken on a powerful new significance.

Coal board managers are not confident about the talks. But the board wants to test whether the public rhetoric of Mr Scargill is matched by the private bargaining of his 24-man executive.

A few more miners went to work yesterday in north Derbyshire.

The ten-man Derbyshire area committee of the union decided unanimously to suspend from membership men who cross picket lines.

● In Yorkshire, where the strike started, 76 Barnsley colliery winders, the men who operate the cages, are planning a ballot on a return to work (the Press Association reports).

● European Community energy ministers in Brussels yesterday earmarked £35m to help miners who lose their jobs through pit closures.

Britain, West Germany, Belgium and France are likely to qualify for the cash to help with retraining job creation and early retirement.

● Leaders from 33 miners' unions round the world voted in Luxembourg yesterday to blockade coal shipments to Britain in a show of support for the National Union of Mineworkers (Reuter reports).

Shipments of coal from Poland will not be affected by the blockade, as the suppression of Solidarity has meant that the international federation cannot enlist the support of Polish mineworkers.

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