

Coal board aims at turning talks into all-out peace drive

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The peace process in the pit strike is strongly under way today as the miners' "rolling stoppage" goes into its twelfth week. Finishing touches to an agenda for talks between the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were being agreed last night as the two sides prepared for top-level negotiations on the future of the industry.

Neither side is willing to endanger the prospects of a settlement by publicly disclosing any details of the forthcoming exchanges, but *The Times* understands that the coal board is determined that these preliminary contacts should be turned swiftly into an all-out attempt to end the dispute.

Miners leaders are more cautious. Mr Peter Heathfield, general secretary of the NUM, said last night: "We are obviously optimistic that we can make some progress, and would hope that the board will recognize that after 11 weeks of strike there is still a determination to preserve jobs and mining communities."

The union hoped that the coal board would recognize these pressures and indicate its intention to withdraw its initial closure programme involving 20 pits and 20,000 jobs. Mr Heathfield added.

The coal board takes some comfort, however, from the fact

that the discussions due to begin tomorrow at a secret location will not be hampered by a union demand that negotiations cannot take place until the industry backs down from its closure programme.

It is unlikely that Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the board, will attend the talks. The NCB will be represented by Mr James Cowan, deputy chairman, and Mr Merrick Spanton, board member for personnel, together with Mr Ned Smith, director of industrial relations for the NCB and Mr Kevin Hunt, his deputy.

The NUM will field all three national officials: Mr Arthur Scargill, president, Mr Michael McGahey, vice-president, and Mr Heathfield, together with the union's head of industrial relations, Mr Mick Clapham and its chief executive, Mr Roger Windsor.

There is some divergence about the prospects for these discussions. The coal board wants a quick move into substantive discussions on the prospect for the industry, including a cutback in capacity of about four million tonnes a year, while the union has a reserve position in insisting that there can be no pit closures.

However, the sudden silence that has descended over the dispute indicates that both sides want to retreat from aggressive

public postures into a more realistic bargaining position. That was borne out yesterday by the disinclination of leading figures on both sides of the dispute to show their hand before tomorrow's crucial talks.

● Extra police were being drafted in to the Orgreave coke plant in South Yorkshire last night after Mr Scargill appealed for a mass blockade of the works today (our Labour Reporter writes).

More than a thousand demonstrators answered Mr Scargill's call to the picket line yesterday on a day when no supplies were due to leave the plant, but today thousands more will join them when the twice daily "coke runs" resume.

Miners' leaders are anxious to prevent the 5,000 tonnes of low sulphur coal reaching Scunthorpe steelworks where it is needed to prevent permanent damage to furnaces, according to the British Steel Corporation.

Meanwhile a sit-in at the National Coal Board's Scottish headquarters in Edinburgh by about 60 miners ended peacefully last night after 10 hours.

The men claimed that the board was withholding holiday pay to which they were entitled. But Mr Albert Wheeler, Scottish area director, told the demonstrators that no one would qualify for holiday pay unless he worked the week before his annual three week leave.

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