

# Unions angry over Government's strike vote scheme

By Paul Routledge and David Felton

Government plans to tighten the law on strike ballots because of the miners' strike provoked fierce political and trade union protests yesterday.

Mr Tom King, Secretary of State for Employment, intends to amend the Trade Union Bill, now in the closing stages of its parliamentary passage, so that strikes will retain immunity from civil action only if they have prior approval in a secret ballot of union members.

His disclosure at a conference of Conservative trade unionists in Birmingham on Saturday brought sharp reaction from the Opposition, from the unions, and from the Industrial Society, a non-partisan body representing both sides of industry.

Mr William Keys, leader of the printing union Sogat '82 and chairman of the TUC's employment policy and organization committee, said: "The Government is really putting an impossible situation to trade unionists. I can see this leading to more wildcat strikes.

"If the proposal went ahead my union would just not ballot in any dispute. That way all strikes would be unofficial."

Mr John Smith, Labour's employment spokesman, described the Government's plan as a piece of political chicanery that would encourage wildcat strikes

The amendment was being

presented as "some kind of answer by the Government to the problems posed by the miners' strike, but it is not. It just shows that the existing legislation has had no bite whatsoever."

He was speaking at the conference in Torquay of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers, and Allied Trades Union whose leaders called last night for the TUC to stand by to coordinate assistance for the miners from the rest of the trade union movement.

The union's executive decided that if the present peace initiative between the miners' union and the coal board founders they would press for organized support for miners and their families through the TUC, which so far has been on the sidelines of the strike.

Mr David Basnett, general secretary of the union, and Mr Smith were dismissive of the impact of the proposed amendment on pre-strike ballots. Mr Smith said the change would take away legal protection from official strikes but hand it to unofficial ones.

The Government's attitude has been influenced by events in the miners' strike. Some areas of the National Union of Mineworkers had ballots which went against joining the strike, but the men were persuaded to

come out by their workmates or by flying pickets.

Mr King said: "I don't think anybody actually dreamt that somebody would embark on industrial action without having the support of their members".

His department is looking at possible amendments to the Bill which would confine immunity from legal action for damages to those strikes that had been endorsed by a majority of union members.

"We think people have a right to be consulted. The only issue here is that there is, under the law, a legal protection conferred on people. That's fair enough, provided it is genuinely what the majority of people want to do," he said.

Mr King has not yet decided on the exact form of the amendment to his Bill, but it will insert a requirement that "a majority" shall have voted for a strike if it is to retain immunity. It is not clear at this stage whether it will be a majority of those voting, or of those entitled to vote.

● Mr Jimmy Millar, NUM branch secretary at Markham colliery in the militant Doncaster coalfield, called yesterday for an end to the mass picketing of the Orgreave coking plant, saying that such tactics were a waste of time and manpower.

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