

Steel unions snub miners and pledge to keep up output

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The steel unions spurned yesterday a plea from leaders of the striking coalminers for sympathetic industrial action that would have halted most steel production in Britain.

In a move that signals the virtual collapse of the "triple alliance" of steel, coal and rail unions, the TUC Steel Industry Committee unanimously rejected proposals from the National Union of Mineworkers for a complete end to steelmaking.

The 14 unions include the main steel union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation; the blastfurnacemen (NUB); Transport and General Workers Union; Electricians (EPTU); Engineers (AUEW and AEUW-TASS); construction workers (UCATT); General and Municipal Workers (GMBATU) and smaller craft unions.

The unions went, a critical stage further, promising to maintain output at all major plants in Britain "using whatever fuel and raw materials can be brought in."

This decision sounds the death knell of attempts by the NUM and rail unions to break supply lines of coal, coke and iron ore, and gives the go-ahead to the British Steel Corporation to employ any means, including non-union labour, to supply its five integrated steelworks at

Port Talbot, Llanwern, Scunthorpe, Redcar and Ravenscraig.

Miners' leaders and officials of the transport unions met last night in Llandudno, where the National Union of Railwaymen's conference is in session, to try to repair the damage to their joint strategy. But the steelworkers appear to have closed ranks

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The TUC Steel Committee said: "It would not be practicable to accede to the NUM's request. This would be damaging to the industry and completely unacceptable to our members."

Steel union leaders remain willing to reach a deal with the miners which would take account of "the technical and commercial factors, and protect the jobs of steelworkers and miners in the longer term by ensuring continuity of supply of all raw material."

They know that would not be accepted by Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the NUM, nor his 24-man executive, which is demanding that coal, coke and ore supplies should be reduced to the minimum required for

safety and maintenance of vital steelmaking plant.

Mr Bill Sirs, general secretary of the ISTC, said last night that he doubted whether putting any of the big steelmaking centres out of action would have the desired effect for the NUM.

"It is not going to deter Mrs Thatcher. One of those plants could be closed permanently, and she could blame it on to the miners."

Further talks may be held between the miners and steelmen, but there is now no likelihood of union acceptance of voluntary cutbacks.

Asked if he would invoke the TUC's inter-union rules governing conduct of disputes, Mr Sirs added: "If our members' jobs are at risk, we shall take the necessary steps to unscramble that risk."

The coal board welcomed the steelworkers decision. "If the NUM choke off coal and iron ore supplies to steel foundries, they will be doing irreparable damage to an industry upon which thousands of miners depend for their living."

British Steel yesterday mounted its biggest lorry convoy to top up the Llanwern works with iron ore. Escorted by police, a column of 95 heavy trucks twice made the 100-mile round trip down the M4 to the Port Talbot steelworks

Coal board says 2,000 men volunteer for redundancy

By Our Labour Editor

The National Coal Board has discreetly begun to implement its controversial plan to make 20,000 pitmen redundant during the current financial year.

As the miners' strike entered its seventeenth week yesterday, figures disclosed to *The Times* show that just more than 2,000 men have agreed to quit the industry for pay-offs rising to £80,000, and they are already leaving.

The job cutbacks are taking place in coalfields where men are still working in defiance of the strike call from the National Union of Mineworkers, but the board is hoping that "drift back to work" will spread to strike-bound areas when the men learn that they can only qualify

for full redundancy if their pit is operating normally.

Lump sum payments of up to £36,000 are being paid to men under 50, and improved entitlements twice that amount for older colliers are being offered. The take-up has been substantial in Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire, South Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

A few of the individual redundancy deals were agreed before the current dispute began, but the "vast majority" have been signed since the strike started on March 12.

The board said last night: "The men in south Nottinghamshire cannot understand why Mr Scargill claims that half

the pits in their area are going to be closed. The union and the men locally know which pits are running out of coal, although they do not know exactly when.

"They also understand what arrangements are being made for redeployment and redundancy, and since the dispute started in collieries that are at work more than 2,000 men have voluntarily opted for redundancy and are leaving the industry."

The redundancies are confined to working coalfields because the complex legislation governing job-loss compensation requires the work unit to be operational when the men seek to qualify for state benefits.

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