

Dock strike starts today as pit talks fail again

● Most of Britain's ports face closure after a national dock strike was called over the supply of coal and iron ore to steelworks

● The call for the strike - from today - came after a third collapse in the peace process in the miners' dispute

● Mr Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman, appealed to miners' leaders to put a new pit closure formula to their delegate conference

● Mr Arthur Scargill, the miners' president, claimed there was "a third hand" at the negotiating table

By Paul Routledge and Barrie Clement

A national dock strike was called yesterday as peace talks in the pit dispute failed yet again. Most of Britain's ports face closure because of a fresh dispute triggered by the miners' blockade of steelworks.

The national docks committee of the Transport and General Workers' Union called out all its 35,000 harbour men from 00.01 this morning in protest at the use of "unregistered labour" to carry supplies to the beleaguered Scunthorpe steelworks.

The unexpected decision sent shock waves through the City, and the breakdown last night of peace talks between the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Coal Board designed to end the pit strike, now in its eighteenth week, is certain to fuel that uncertainty.

Mr John Connolly, national docks officer of the transport union, said yesterday that there had been a "clear and intentional" breach of the docks labour scheme, but the British Steel Corporation argued later that it had received written approval from the union.

The country's main ports looked certain last night to obey the call for strike action from transport union leaders at least until a national delegates' meeting tomorrow. Liverpool, London, Hull and Southamp-

ton, which employ most of Britain's 13,500 registered dockworkers, will be in the vanguard of the action.

Less clear is the response of the 21,000 transport workers' union members employed in ports not covered by the 36-year-old dock labour scheme.

The strike call includes union members who work on ferries, but Mr Connolly said that special consideration would be given to those used by holiday-makers. Tour companies said last night that most routes should run normally.

The union has been involved in a long-running battle with the National Association of Port Employers over its demand for the Government to end the labour scheme in the docks where dockers enjoy security of employment and the union controls the size of the workforce.

The leadership of the transport workers' union has been keen to take action to support the scheme and to back the 17-week miners' strike. The issue of Immingham docks, where the ore was landed for Scunthorpe steelworks, brings both strands together, although Mr Connolly emphasized that the dispute is in no way "secondary action" in legal terms and is in defence of dockers' terms and conditions.

Mr Nicholas Finney, chairman of the National Association of Port Employers, said: "We are appalled at the news that the TGWU have called for a national strike over a local issue concerning the handling of iron ore at Immingham for British Steel.

"The question of whether the terms of the statutory dock labour scheme have been breached is one for the Government and the National Dock Labour Board to deal with by whatever action they consider necessary, including the courts."

The strike will particularly affect London's container port at Tilbury, where 1,900 dockers handle traffic coming into the capital.

The ports of Immingham and Grimsby on Humberside were already at a standstill yesterday because of a dispute over ore shipments. Both the dockers and train drivers have refused to handle the imports for some time. Dockers' leaders said they "took the day off".

● A large consignment of iron ore was taken by train from Immingham to Scunthorpe last night (the Press Association reports). A spokesman for British Rail confirmed that the delivery followed talks with staff at Immingham, but refused to discuss details.

MacGregor appeal to NUM

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Mr Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman, attempted last night to save the faltering peace process in the mining strike. He appealed to leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers to put to their delegate conference in Sheffield tomorrow a new formula for agreement on which pits should close.

Speaking after returning from a fourth day of negotiations with miners' leaders, he said: "We gave them a formula for a settlement which they now have in their hands, so they are well equipped to take care of the problem, it is now up to the miners."

Asked to explain the new formula, Mr MacGregor said: "We have a paper which we presented to them showing the formula to the solution to the problem."

Would the formula involve a differing of the words as regards pits that are now defunct? "They are almost identical words to those that we agreed to with them. We just

added one word, that's all." Mr MacGregor refused to say what that word was.

Mr MacGregor was optimistic that striking pitmen would accept the proposed peace deal, but his optimism was not shared by Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the NUM, who insisted that the talks had broken down, a view apparently shared by Mr Ned Smith, the coal board's industrial relations director.

The different perceptions of where the two sides are now was reflected in the hard line taken by miners' leaders who clearly felt that the coal board had not made sufficient concessions to make an agreement worth while.

"It seems to us that throughout the negotiations there has been a third party whose hand has been at the negotiating table. At each stage when we appeared to have a settlement it was clear to us that central Government was pulling the strings of the coal board negotiators. We found that sad

and regrettable", Mr Scargill said.

It is clear that both sides have made concessions in the four meetings since last Thursday, though the NUM claims that it has made the biggest step away from its previous position that no pit should close on "economic" grounds.

But the coal board and the union could not agree on a number of fundamental points - including the definition of "exhausted" pits. Mr Michael McGahey, vice-president of the NUM, said it had accepted, in a draft agreement, a new definition of such collieries. The union would accept shut-down of those mines which "had no further mineable reserves that are workable or which can be developed".

This wording is, however, very similar to the union's original definition, and goes nowhere near the coal board's insistence that pits which are making heavy financial losses should be closed.

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By Paul Routledge and Barrie Clement.

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