

Coal board dismay on talks

By Our Labour Editor

The miners' strike, entering its nineteenth week, looks set to run for another six weeks as peace talks resume between pitmen's leaders and the National Coal Board.

The board's senior managers, who are to meet national officials of the National Union of Mineworkers on Wednesday, have been dismayed at the militant tone of their weekend speeches that have again diminished hopes of an early settlement.

Union leaders privately believe that they are still at the "talks about talks about talks" stage. It seems unlikely that the delegate conference which met in Sheffield last week will be recalled to give a verdict on the negotiations before the end of August.

Mr Arthur Scargill, the miners' president, told the Durham miners' gala on Saturday: "There has to be no fudge compromise. We have to win

this dispute if we believe in what we have been fighting for."

The union's general secretary, Mr Peter Heathfield, promised the 10,000 pit demonstrators: "We will, at the end of the day, inflict on Mrs Thatcher the kind of defeat we imposed on Ted Heath in 1972 and 1974".

Their remarks triggered fresh despondency at the coal board, where managers were hoping to pick up the threads of the four-day round of talks which were adjourned without a settlement but which kept alive the peace process.

Mr Ned Smith, the board's director of industrial relations, told *The Times*: "We have put proposals to the union that we regard as reasonable, and which I think would be regarded by a majority of people in the industry as reasonable. I sincerely hope that the talks will be meaningful."

The two principal points at

issue between the union and the board are the union's insistence that the "pit closure programme" announced on March 6 must be withdrawn unconditionally, and that collieries must not be closed on economic grounds.

Mr Scargill reaffirmed at the gala the union's insistence that threatened pits must be kept open by new investment, and that there must be a new construction on the meaning of "exhausted pits": the miners would not talk about economic closures.

However, the board has not moved from its stand that there must be grounds other than safety or complete seam exhaustion. Mr Ian MacGregor, the chairman, will make a further attempt to persuade the union to accept that mines where there are no further reserves that can

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be "beneficially developed" should, by agreement, close.

Mr MacGregor has made a second personal appeal to more than 120,000 striking miners to return. In a letter to pitmen, he has put on record nine points on which the two sides have agreed during the latest round of talks, including union acceptance of "other reasons" for closure apart from safety seam exhaustion.

He admits: "We cannot agree about the 'other reasons' for pit closures. The NCB say that when a pit cannot be ben-

eficially developed, we should not continue to waste human or financial resources or equipment on it, and we should come to an agreement on such pits.

"The NUM does not agree. They say pits should be kept open even when they are of no benefit to the industry. The NCB cannot accept the NUM's position . . . that is why the NCB refused to withdraw the proposals they put forward on March 6 which will provide security and stability in the industry."

The board is conscious of the holiday period looming in late

July and August, which will sharply reduce the amount of coal coming out of the moderate coalfields still working. Power stations normally stock up in the summer, but there will be little output from which to replenish those stocks unless the slow drift back to work in the strike-bound areas gathers pace substantially.

Mr Neil Kinnock, the Labour leader, said at the Durham gala that the miners had "no alternative to fighting." He added: "Miners' backs are up against the great wall of unemployment."

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