

Pit talks halted for board's campaign

By Paul Routledge and David Felton

Miners' leaders will be told later this week that peace talks in the pit strike are unlikely to resume before the middle of next month.

A three-week lull in the peace process is expected as ministers and the National Coal Board step up pressure to accelerate the drift back to work in coalfields where the stoppage has mixed support.

But the executive of the National Union of Mineworkers' meeting on Thursday will reaffirm backing for the strike, which today goes into its twentieth week, and there are no signs of a serious revolt by the moderates in the leadership.

The main stumbling block to agreement is still the one word "beneficial" in the board's version of the back-to-work formula, which would open the door for pit closures on economic grounds.

However, the union does privately admit that the board did make a substantial concession last week on the future of five "test case" pits: Polmaise in Scotland, Herrington in Durham, Bull Cliffe Wood and Cortonwood in Yorkshire and Snowdown in Kent. Those collieries would remain open subject to the provisions of the new criteria for pit closures.

The miners insist that because of the strike, the industry will be lucky to fulfil half its target of 100 million tonnes in 1984-85, and therefore to talk

about pit closures in that period is nonsensical.

Coal board chiefs have replied that they have "an audience" to satisfy other than just the miners' leaders with whom they are negotiating, presumed to be a reference to the Cabinet, which has abandoned any pretence that the Government is not involved in the dispute.

The board yesterday made an appeal for Thursday's meeting of the union executive to consider "coolly and quietly" the board's draft agreement on pit closures but there were clear indications that the offer will be withdrawn if the executive approves its negotiators' rejection.

Union negotiators will report to the executive that the "final offer" is no longer available but Mr Ned Smith, the board's industrial relations director, was at pains to make clear the offer is still on the table.

Speaking on BBC radio, Mr Smith said he hoped the executive would carefully consider the offer and the undertakings given by the board on pit closures.

He believed the union should now call a ballot of its members to allow them to decide on the formula. He said the union's criteria that no mine should be closed if it had "minable or workable" reserves, was a recipe for producing coal that was unsaleable.

Continued on back page, col 1

Strike talks halted for board's drive

Continued from page 1

In south Derbyshire last night miners indicated that they would continue to work despite a directive from the union conference at Sheffield that they should join the strike and refuse to cross picket lines.

About a third of the area's 3,300 union members attended a meeting and rejected the conference recommendation.

● Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, said yesterday that coal stocks at the power stations were sufficient to take the country "way into 1985" without any need for power cuts (our Political Reporter writes).

In an interview on London Weekend Television's *Weekend World* Mr Walker maintained the Government's attempt to encourage miners to bring pressure on the union leadership for a ballot when he said that there was no industrial reason for the strike and affirmed the message that the miners could win by prolonging it.

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