

Working miners in secret campaign for a return to pits

By Paul Routledge and Tim Jones

As miners' leaders dig in for a confrontation lasting "beyond any date the Government can set", dissident pitmen from Nottinghamshire are touring the coalfields in an attempt to end the 20-week-old strike.

A series of secret talks has been held in London and at 12 coalfields, aimed at forming a strategy for a widespread return to work by reluctant strikers. It is hoped to agree on a date when all miners who want to work will report for duty.

The initiative was disclosed in South Wales, where local National Union of Mineworkers officials dismissed it as the work of cranks.

But a senior National Coal Board source in London said: "If it turns out to be an effective move, we would obviously welcome it."

Board officials are privately sceptical that the movement will achieve anything, although its aim to set a common date on which those who want to work will turn up at the pit gate all over the country is regarded as practical.

It would dissipate the union's picketing strength, but police resources would also be heavily stretched.

The plan has been formulated by a working Nottinghamshire miner, known only as "Silver Birch" because he does not wish to be identified. He has already received threats that his daughter will be raped, his son beaten up and his house burnt.

He said that the move, which has the backing of a coordinating committee in Nottinghamshire, was being made to help the thousands of miners he believes are frightened to return to work because of intimidation.

He said: "We don't want to break the NUM, but to make it more democratic. The real enemy of the union is the Marxist leadership."

One South Wales miner said: "The aim is to 'bury' Arthur Scargill. The hardship being caused is terrible and pathetic. Hundreds of men in South Wales want to return to work but dare not because of intimidation. I listen to the stories of hardship and suffering and feel like crying. But there is nothing we can do about it so far."

The plan in South Wales is initially for men to turn up for work at ten pits in the hope that the action will encourage others to cross the picket line.

"Silver Birch", who has been using his fortnight's holiday to travel throughout Britain, said that the initiative was also aimed to show that miners who wanted to work were not on their own.

Although most pits in South Wales originally decided against joining the strike, they fell into line when ordered to do so by their leaders and because of the strong reluctance to cross picket lines.

"Silver Birch" said that the London meeting, the first national gathering of the return-to-work group, had been attended by miners from Nottinghamshire, Lancashire, Staffordshire, North and South Wales, Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Scotland, Kent and North and South Yorkshire.

Mr Scargill yesterday indicated that his executive will tomorrow brush aside the coal board's latest peace proposals and continue the action for many more weeks.

He said on TV-am: "If Mr Peter Walker says they can go on to a certain date, I am quite certain we can go on beyond that and win the strike."

The Secretary of State for Energy has told MPs that coal stocks are sufficient to last until early 1985 before there would be any power cuts.

Mr Scargill ruled out acceptance of the coal board's latest draft settlement, put forward during talks with the union last week. "There is nothing on the table to accept or reject", he argued.

"If the NCB had not insisted on economic conditions (for pit closures) with the use of the word 'beneficial' we would have had an embryo of a settlement on the table."

At Port Talbot yesterday a mass picket of 500 miners and their wives failed to prevent convoys of lorries from carrying coal and iron ore to Llanwern steelworks.

Five lorries had their windscreens smashed by missiles and pickets scuffled with the police, who arrested 34 people including seven women.

At Llanwern the police made five arrests and condemned the pickets' tactic of setting fire to the tinder-dry roadside verges, which caused thick smoke to engulf the M4.

Scotland's biggest colliery, Bilston Glen, near Edinburgh, was again the scene of violence as 600 pickets clashed with the police yesterday. The confrontation ended with 33 pickets being arrested. Three police officers were slightly injured and one picket received mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from a policeman.

Drift back, page 2

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