

MacGregor ready to withdraw 'final' pit offer

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The stakes in the pit strike are likely to rise even higher today after the National Coal Board surveys the failure of its "back to work" campaign in the militant coalfields.

The full board meets to determine its next step and its chairman, Mr Ian MacGregor, is expected to recommend withdrawal of his latest "final" offer to the National Union of Mineworkers.

With the South Wales miners blockading their headquarters against High Court sequestrators and underground colliery damage rising sharply, the board is to examine options to step up the pressure on the union in the hope of accelerating the slow drift back to work.

Mr MacGregor favours withdrawal of the offer to miners' leaders which would give them a powerful say in deciding which pits would close because they are incapable of "beneficial" exhaustion.

There are dissenting voices on the 10-man board, but in the past they have closed ranks to support the chairman rather than display divisions that would help the strikers.

The board might decide to hold the offer open for a week, in the hope of influencing the miners' delegate conference in Sheffield next Friday. But

managers do not believe that this gesture would be enough to dent the hardline militancy displayed in the 21-week strike.

There are signs that the labour movement is strengthening its support. The nine union "summit" in London two days ago is understood to have discussed amendments to the miners' motion to next month's Trade Union Congress to give greater industrial backing.

The most obvious line of support would be for the TUC to call on all 100 affiliated unions not to cross miners' picket lines, particularly outside the working collieries. Such an instruction could halt the busing that is taking 40,000 miners into the pits.

In the strikes of 1972 and 1974, the TUC issued guidance to member unions not to cross NUM picket lines. That strategy virtually halted the flow of vital materials into the power stations, leading to rota disconnections of electricity.

But such a move would be resisted by power industry unions.

On the eve of today's NCB meeting, 130 tons of food left London for striking miners and their families. Twenty-six lorries were dispatched to Yorkshire and the Midlands by Mr

Brian Nicholson, leader of London dockers, and vice-chairman of the Transport and General Workers Union.

Food convoys are being assembled in Ireland, and arrangements are being made to provide holidays for several hundred miners' children.

While the grass-roots campaign shows signs of growing, there is an ambivalent attitude at national level. The TUC's "inner cabinet", its finance and general purposes committee, is not being called into emergency session.

The coal board reported no change in the number of pits on strike yesterday. Twenty were working normally, six were producing some coal; three had some men working but not enough to produce coal and 28 were on strike and 118 were on holiday but mostly strikebound.

However, the political knock-on effect of the dispute is still being felt in the wake of the High Court seizure of the £2.8m assets of the Welsh miners to pay the £50,000 fine levied for contempt of orders banning secondary picketing.

Mr James Milne, general secretary of the Scottish TUC, said: "This latest action will make it even more difficult to achieve the settlement that is

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urgently required by the miners, the NCB and the nation. The only people who clearly do not want a settlement are Mrs Thatcher and her Cabinet, as has been spelled out in Mr Nigel Lawson's statement that they see the strike as a "worthwhile investment".

The coal board is today continuing its advertising campaign in local newspapers circulating in the mining communities, arguing that NUM members have not had a chance to vote on the peace formula rejected by their leaders.

The "Rubens Hotel" plan would confine pit closures to those agreed with the union on the grounds that reserves cannot be "beneficially" exploited.

The union executive has unanimously rejected this proposition on the grounds that it permits the board to close mines on economic grounds before their reserves are exhausted.

● The City firm of Price Waterhouse, charged with sequestering funds from the South Wales area of the NUM, has written to the union offering to discuss the case (Tim Jones writes from Cardiff).

It is understood the letter says that the job of the four sequestrators would be easier if the union cooperated.

At the union's headquarters in Pontypridd, where 10 miners slept behind barbed wire barricades, Mr Emlyn Williams, area president, said: "Upon receipt of the letter from the accountants it will be discussed by the area council and treated appropriately."

In their present mood, with Mr Williams calling for general strikes, the miners will reject any cooperation.

The union's auditors Pannell, Kerr and Forster, of Cardiff, have been approached by the sequestrators.

● A police van was overturned, two others badly damaged and four officers hurt in a clash outside a nightclub in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, police said yesterday. Bricks, stones and broken glass rained on the police outside the Pussycat Club.

Last night police were trying to trace the miners involved and the firms which supplied their coaches. The trouble flared on Wednesday night when a policeman and a policewoman arrived at the club to investigate a disturbance there.

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