

# Pit moderates to help plan rolling return to work

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Moderate miners and National Coal Board managers are organizing a "rolling return to work" over the next few weeks in an effort to beat the pit strike, now into its twenty-third week.

Their campaign to reverse the momentum of conflict in the coal industry will be taken a step further today at a second secret conference between Yorkshire dissidents and Mr Chris Butcher, known as "Silver Birch", the Nottinghamshire moderate trying to coordinate an end to the dispute.

A strategy of accelerating the slow drift back to work is under discussion with the coal board, and leaders of the Working Miners' Movement are negotiating with colliery managers and the police on the best way to ensure a free passage to work for those who want to opt out of the seemingly-endless strike.

The dispute began over the proposed closure of Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire and from March 12 was turned into a "rolling strike" that eventually engulfed most coalfields and halted 80 per cent of pits.

A coal board spokesman said last night: "It is a matter for local managers and those who wish to return to work what arrangements they enter into." He declined to give details of the phased back-to-work plan.

But *The Times* understands that emphasis will be put on a substantial, pre-arranged return to work on the first shift each week at selected pits known only to the police and the coal board. This tactic would build on previous experience. The coal board reported yesterday that 131 men who had previously been on strike had

resumed normal working on Monday.

Today's second "Silver Birch" conference, convened by Mr Butcher, aged 34, a blacksmith at Bevercotes colliery, north Nottinghamshire, is designed to split further the ranks of the National Union of Mineworkers in Yorkshire, where 56,000 men are still on strike after nearly six months.

Moderates from over the county border are expected to swell the numbers of men who attended a similar gathering on Sunday, at which rank and filers from the new Selby coalfield, from Markham Main, Kiveton Park and Prince of Wales pits joined with anti-strike miners from Durham and Northumberland in laying plans for a concerted breaking of the picket lines.

Humberside police sealed off a four-mile stretch of the A18 in Scunthorpe as Yorkshire miners tried to enter the town to picket the British Steel works. Only 200 got through and 17 were arrested.

Edinburgh solicitors representing working miners at the Bilston Glen colliery are considering legal action to force the NUM to hold a national strike ballot.

At a press conference in his Chesterfield constituency, Mr Tony Benn MP said: "We have now seen police action in the mining dispute comparable to what is happening in Northern Ireland. I have a plain duty to warn people that what we saw happening in Belfast on Sunday could happen in Chesterfield, next week or some time".

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