

Miners go into new peace talks with full TUC backing

● The miners' union and the National Coal Board are to resume peace talks aimed at ending the six-month-old pit strike after secret discussions promoted by the publisher Mr Robert Maxwell

● The Trades Union Congress overwhelmingly agreed a three-point plan of action in support of the miners at the first day of its annual congress in Brighton

● Mr Peter Walker, the Secretary of State for Energy, has welcomed the resumed talks, but the Government is said to be determined not to retreat on the closure of uneconomic pits

● Mr Arthur Scargill's call for greatly increased picketing activity was given a muted response by striking miners throughout most of Britain

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From Paul Routledge, Labour Editor, Brighton

Miners' leaders are to resume peace talks with the National Coal Board, after winning a massive vote at the Trade Union Congress yesterday for extending the dispute into other industries.

Contacts between the coal board and the National Union of Mineworkers were reestablished, after a break of nearly seven weeks, by Mr Robert Maxwell, owner of Mirror Group Newspapers, during secret weekend discussions.

The peace process is expected to restart tentatively in two days' time, but the immediate proposals for a settlement do not look very good.

As the talks were being arranged, Mr Arthur Scargill, the miners' president, made clear that his terms for an end to the stoppage were unchanged. They are withdrawal of the March 6 pit closure programme; guarantees to keep open five "test case" pits in Yorkshire, Scotland, Durham and Kent, and no closures on economic grounds.

The union's general secretary, Mr Peter Heathfield, added last night: "I hope there is realism and that the board is now prepared to resolve the dispute".

Privately, some coal-board managers are sceptical about the ballyhoo surrounding the Maxwell initiative, and attribute much of the behind-the-scenes preparatory work to other third parties, ranging from the Archbishop of York to Mr Stanley Orme, the shadow energy secretary.

There was also some dispute last night about who had

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invited whom. The union said it had been approached by a third party with a request from the National Coal Board to recommence negotiations.

But Mr Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman told a London press conference that he had been approached on behalf of the union, and indicated that the initial steps towards reopening of negotiations had come from the miners.

While the union is still insisting on withdrawal of the board's colliery closure programme involving 20 pits and 20,000 jobs, Mr MacGregor said yesterday: "There would be

no point in any new discussions unless they had indicated they were prepared to talk about the realities of life."

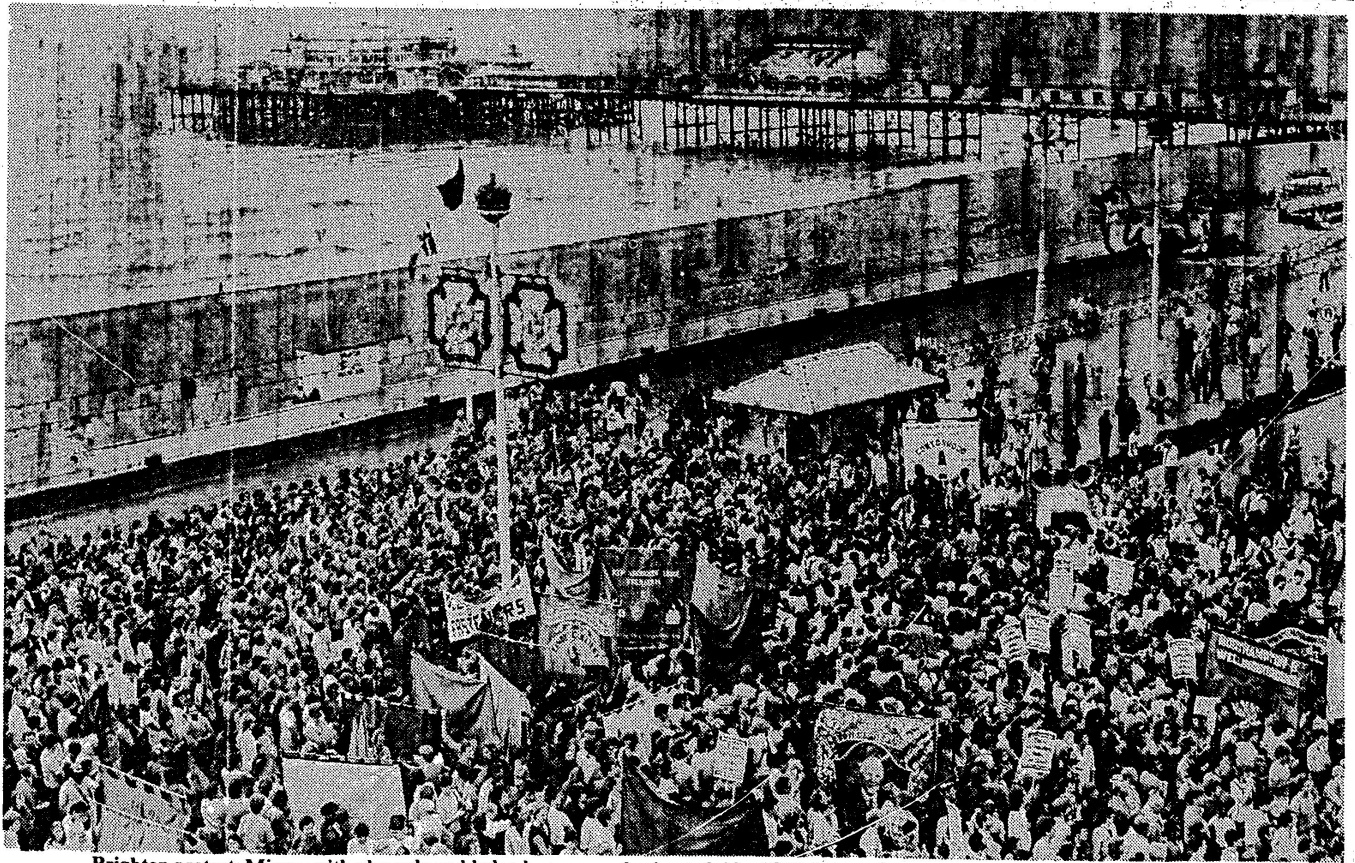
Asked if he had changed his own position, he said: "So far I am the proud owner of all the initiatives and I would now look to the union for one."

"I am optimistic that we will get that initiative and I believe that in the long run the good common sense of the miners will lead to a return to work."

The miners' union, nevertheless, regards itself as being in a considerable stronger bargaining position after yesterday's overwhelming TUC vote for cash aid, a blockade on the movement of coal and coke, and the blacking of oil used as a substitute fuel in power stations.

TUC delegates gave Mr Scargill a standing ovation when he went to the rostrum to request the "total support" of the labour movement. He said: "Give that support today and I am confident that in the weeks ahead we shall grow increasingly strong. We shall force the coal board not only back to the negotiating table, but to honour the signed agreement between

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Brighton protest: Miners with placards and lodge banners gathering to lobby TUC delegates yesterday (Photographs: Bill Warhurst)



Miners take time off to sunbathe on the beach

Miners to resume pit peace talks

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the Government, the coal board and ourselves."

Moving the general council's three-point plan of action, Mr Len Murray, the TUC general secretary, said: "We now stand shoulder to shoulder with them. Our purpose is to bring this concentrated power of the NCB and the Government, to get the board back to the negotiating table and in a frame of mind to make an agreement."

The purpose of the measures approved yesterday was "to make the dispute more effective and to make mass picketing unnecessary". He condemned picket line violence, saying there had been scenes which reflected no credit on the trade union movement.

Agreement now being sought with unions in power stations, steel works, and other coal consuming industries had been an effective weapon in the 1974 dispute, Mr Murray continued. By seeking similar arrangements now: "Congress can send

a message to the Government that it will not let the miners and their families starve; it will not let the miners lose; that it wants both sides to make a fresh and urgent commitment to resolve the dispute; that congress wants a fair and satisfactory settlement under which the striking miners can go back to work with their heads held high."

A note of dissent was struck by the electricians, the power station managers and the blast furnacemen.

Mr Eric Hammond, general secretary-elect of the electricians' union, had to pause several times during his speech because he could not be heard over the slow handclapping and abuse.

He accused the general council of dishonesty in promising the miners what their unions could not deliver, adding: "The general council has spoken and today congress will speak, but the members have yet to be heard."

Maxwell in pits limelight

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including Mr Peter Heathfield, the general secretary.

It appears that Mr Maxwell has been able to persuade both sides to reopen talks without any fresh proposals on the table although the *Plan for Coal*, drawn up in 1974, will figure centrally in the negotiations

Much of the conciliation was done either in the early morning or after midnight and intensified over the weekend when Mr Ray Buckton, the train drivers' leader, who is this year's TUC chairman, also became involved in persuading the NUM to agree to hold the talks.

It was being said in Brighton last night that Mr Maxwell's boundless energy and a personal conviction that the strike had gone on long enough had overridden obstacles put in the way of new peace talks. It is also thought that he may to an extent have been pushing at an open door because both sides now want a speedy end to the six-months strike.

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From Paul Routledge, Labour Editor.

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