

Acrimony as coal peace process verges on collapse

- Talks planned tomorrow between coal board and miners' leaders were cancelled yesterday and the peace process neared collapse as both sides dug deeper into entrenched positions
- Mr Neil Kinnock called at the TUC conference for support for striking miners but condemned the "tiny, tiny few" responsible for picket line violence
- The Prime Minister, rejecting Labour's request for a recall of Parliament, said the dispute could be quickly settled if the NUM accepted closure of uneconomic pits
- Sterling fell to a record low of \$1.2905 against the dollar before recovering slightly. The failure of a pit peace initiative was held partly to blame

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From Paul Routledge, Labour Editor, Brighton

The peace process in the pit strike faltered last night and looked certain to collapse as both sides dug deeper into their entrenched bargaining positions.

Talks due to take place tomorrow were cancelled yesterday after the National Coal Board made clear that it was not willing to reopen negotiations unless the National Union of Mineworkers accepted that closure of "uneconomic" pits was on the agenda.

Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the coal board, said last night: "I am ready at any time to meet people to discuss constructive views to settle the dispute. If Mr Scargill has something constructive to say, I will be ready to see him on Sunday."

The swift response of Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the union was: "I think Mr MacGregor needs a long rest." The union's general secretary Mr Peter Heathfield, added: "They are playing ducks and drakes with us."

Mr MacGregor went further in a BBC interview when told that the miners' president was accusing the coal board of scuppering the talks. "That would be normal for Mr Scargill", he said "He lies through his teeth."

The latest development in the

six-month-old dispute came at the end of a long day of charges and counter-charges of duplicity, and the on-off talks saga degenerated into farce.

The break in the seven-week-old negotiating deadlock, arranged over the weekend by the Fleet Street publisher, Mr Robert Maxwell, failed even before it got off the ground.

The discussions were first due to take place at a Gatwick hotel tonight, but were postponed

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until tomorrow and then put off indefinitely, after a series of telephone conversations between top-level coal board officials and the union, whose leaders are attending the Trades Union Congress in Brighton.

In a fresh outbreak of personal hostility between the two men, Mr Scargill accused Mr MacGregor of discussing the likely prospects of peace talks several hours after his industrial relations director, Mr Ned Smith, had already told the union that the conditions for meaningful negotiations did not exist.

The uncertainty about the position of the two sides appears to have stemmed from the failure of communication

which allowed both the miners and the coal board to believe that the other was ready to shift from its hard-line bargaining position.

But despite contacts between the third-party intermediaries and the Secretary for State for Energy, Mr Peter Walker, it became clear that nothing had changed.

The miners are still insisting on withdrawal of the March 6 colliery closure programme and an agreement that all existing mines be kept open, while the board is adamant that loss-making pits must close when their "beneficial" reserves are exhausted.

Mr Scargill told an impromptu press conference in the lobby of the congress centre: "When MacGregor appeared on television, the decision not to talk had already been indicated to our general secretary, though I did not hear of it until he was able to contact me."

He claimed that political pressure from the Government had been brought to bear to ensure that the latest peace moves did not succeed, and a number of top-level officials of the NUM are now privately convinced that there can be no settlement of the dispute before the Conservative Party conference in six weeks' time.

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When the Maxwell initiative ran into the sands, other third parties stepped in to fill the breach, including, it is understood, Mr Stan Orme, the Opposition energy spokesman. Their efforts may have prevented the peace process from collapsing completely, but the chances of an early settlement are now regarded as virtually nil.

Instead, strike leaders are turning their attention to an intensification of the dispute by spreading it to the power supply and steel industries in line with TUC policy approved two days ago.

Officials of the largest union in the generating stations – the General and Boilermakers' – met last night to discuss how to give practical effect to the proposal to block the movement of coal and coke and to black the use of oil as a substitute fuel.

Mr Scargill claimed that men at six power stations had already indicated that they were willing not to touch coal or oil in Yorkshire, Wales and Lancashire; and despite the strong opposition from electricians and managers in the industry, moves to bring all the unions

together to implement the TUC strategy are going ahead.

Yesterday's tragi-comedy was played out on the fringes of the Trades Union Congress.

From early morning until late last night, speculation rose and fell about the prospects of further peace talks "reliably" reported to have been abandoned and reinstated three times.

During the afternoon, the coal board issued a statement by Mr James Cowan, its deputy chairman, putting its case about the failure of the Maxwell initiative.

It said: "The board state unequivocally that they have not cancelled talks with the NUM. They remain ready at any time to have meaningful talks to resolve this damaging dispute.

"On Monday, in further discussions between Mr Peter Heathfield on behalf of the NUM, and Mr Ned Smith on behalf of the NCB, it was mutually agreed that as the NUM were not prepared to discuss closures other than on exhaustion or safety grounds, in these circumstances a further meeting would be neither meaningful nor purposeful."

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