

Peace talks saved by MacGregor compromise

From Paul Routledge, Labour Editor, Edinburgh

A new formula for the management of the coal industry saved peace talks in the miners' strike from collapse yesterday.

Negotiations between the coal board and the National Union of Mineworkers will resume this morning after Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the NCB, tabled a compromise form of words governing the closure of "exhausted" collieries.

The new formula would allow the board to exercise "responsible" use of human and financial resources, if it understood.

This formula would replace the controversial clause three of the July 18 draft settlement, rejected by NUM leaders, and would permit the closure of pits unless they have coal reserves that can be "beneficially developed".

It was Mr MacGregor's decision to drop this crucial phrase that prevented the negotiations from breaking down yesterday afternoon. After seeing the new formula, the union agreed to continue talking.

During a break in the talks in Edinburgh yesterday, the NUM accused the coal board of intransigence and said there were serious difficulties in the way of a settlement. But the peace process - the eighth attempt to end the strike since it began on March 12 - stayed alive as both sides showed a deep reluctance to be blamed for bringing it to a halt.

The coal board management team left Edinburgh last night, reportedly for London, where the next round of talks is expected to take place later today.

NUM leaders confirmed their earlier statement that "serious difficulties" still stood in the way of an agreement. The TUC was appraised of developments by telephone yesterday.

A three-man TUC team - Mr Norman Willis, the general secretary, Mr David Basnett, the chairman of the economic committee and Mr Ray Buckton, last year's chairman - are monitoring negotiations.

Mr Ned Smith, NCB director of industrial relations said: "There are logistical problems. We are trying to sort them out".

Like the accompanying media circus, the coal board discovered that accommodation in the city was almost impossible to find.

Asked if there was going to be a settlement, Mr Smith replied: "I sincerely hope so. Obviously if we are talking, things are better than if we had failed".

There is still, however, a deep gulf between the parties on the basic issue of what constitutes an exhausted pit that can be closed without dispute. Each has made proposals unacceptable to the other, to bridge the gap.

NUM leaders have submitted their own version of what the criteria should be before a pit can close, and they are seeking to link colliery shut-downs to a reaffirmation of the *Plan for Coal* which envisages expanding coal production.

The fact that the talks are to continue into a fourth day has restored flagging confidence in the negotiations, though there is still a long way to go. Asked whether there were any difficulties, Mr MacGregor commented: "I would think so - for them, because they have to face the realities of the world."

Mr MacGregor said: "We continue to offer initiatives to try to settle this damaging dispute. We get back responses which modify our suggestions and make them impractical for our adoption."

Any proposals from today's talks must first be put to the

Continued on back page, col 7

Pit talks back from the brink

Continued from page 1

NUM National Executive which meets in Sheffield tomorrow and then to a special delegate conference of the union before the strike can be called off.

The decision to continue talking took the coal board as much by surprise as it did observers. Mr MacGregor and his four-man management team had already booked out of their hotel in the Midlothian countryside and a room had been booked at the hotel where the talks were taking place for a press conference to explain why the talks had ended in failure.

But the mood changed significantly during the afternoon and both sides agreed it would be worthwhile to continue negotiations.

Peace talks saved by Macgregor compromise.

From Paul Routledge, Labour Editor.

The Times (London, England), Wednesday, Sep 12, 1984; pg. 1; Issue 61934. (670 words)

Category: News

© Times Newspapers Limited

Gale Document Number:CS17141548