

Coal talks collapse over closure of uneconomic pits

- Talks aimed at ending the pit strike collapsed after the miners insisted that they would accept no settlement giving the board freedom to close uneconomic pits
- The TUC called on the coal board to resume negotiations. It said that other unions would take supportive action if the peace process did not restart
- The equivalent of 750,000 man days has been worked by officers brought into coalfields to support local forces, the head of the police operations said
- The dock strike may be called off next week. Transport and steel unions have reached agreement on the transport of coal to Ravenscraig steel works in Scotland

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The miners' strike threatens to go into the winter, after the latest round of peace talks collapsed last night on their sixth day, but there are TUC moves for a resumption of negotiations.

Leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Coal Board agreed to end the 30 hours of negotiations when it became clear that the miners would not accept any form of words giving the board freedom to close uneconomic pits.

A seventh draft of criteria for deciding what is an "exhausted" pit was rejected by union officials.

Last night the TUC called on the coal board to restart negotiations.

Mr Michael McGahey, vice-president of the miners' union said that pit men's leaders were ready to have a dialogue "with anyone prepared to facilitate negotiations to end the dispute".

The TUC's "inner cabinet" is to meet early next week and moves are to be made to give effect to last week's Congress decision on a mutual aid pact for the miners, which could bring power stations and steel workers into the dispute.

Last night it called on the coal board to restart negotiations, and said that otherwise

there could be supportive action in other industries.

TUC leaders expressed their strong support for NUM efforts to secure a settlement and "expressed great concern about the intransigent and difficult approach taken by the NCB in the talks".

Negotiations broke down over five words - "in line with their responsibilities" - a formula designed to retain management's right to manage.

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The union interprets it as giving the board powers to close the big loss-making collieries.

Mr Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman, blamed the union for the breakdown, saying: "The board believe that the inability of the NUM to negotiate a settlement despite all the efforts made by the board is the continuing cause of the dispute."

Miners' leaders immediately went to Congress House for talks with the TUC's "three wise men" - the general secretary, Mr Norman Willis, the economic committee chairman, Mr David Basnett, and a past chairman, Mr Ray Buckton - who have been monitoring the progress of the talks on behalf of

the labour movement as a whole.

Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the miners' union, said after the Congress House meeting: "The union had tried desperately to secure a negotiated settlement but the board continues to insist there must be closures on 'economic' grounds."

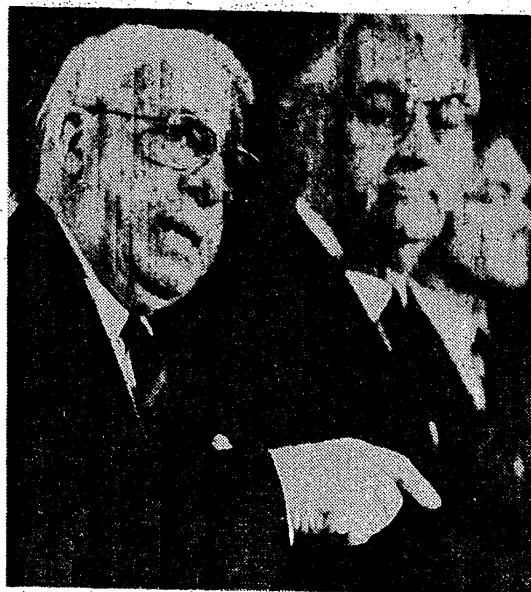
He rejected allegations by the coal board that the union had reneged on its initial acceptance of part of the peace formula, and released details of the negotiations to support his argument that Mr MacGregor had refused even to look at the final proposal put forward yesterday.

The coal board is also prepared to put its case to the TUC, arguing that the latest "final" offer is a basis for a reasonable settlement and an immediate resumption of work.

Mr MacGregor said: "The dispute is quite unnecessary, bearing in mind the assurance given repeatedly during the discussions by the board with regard to colliery closures, and the following assurances given to all people employed in the industry:

1: A stable industry with a minimum of 100 million tonnes with the prospect of expansion

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Mr MacGregor, with his industrial relations chief, Mr Ned Smith (top), and Mr Scargill, after talks broke down.

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as the market opportunities arise;

2: No compulsory redundancies;

3: Every man who wants to stay in the industry will be offered another job plus substantial transfer payments and resettlement allowances, if he is affected by closure;

4: Improved terms under the redundant mineworkers' payment scheme which provides redundancy terms by far the most generous in western Europe;

5: 5.2 per cent wage offer on grade rates from November 1, 1983;

6: Continued high investment by the NCB - between £700m and £800m was planned in 1984-85."

The board is to do all it can to inform its 180,000 pit men of the conditions on which the industry can return to work.

Mr MacGregor added: "The board believes that it is now time for the mineworkers to make their views known to their leaders. They have been denied the opportunity to do this for

far too long. All the pits are open for work."

The board gave a blow-by-blow account of the six days of talks, giving details of the various stages through which the controversial clause on pit closures had passed before reaching the final version.

The pit closure formula they broke down on said: "It is agreed that since the advent of Plan for Coal there have been colliery closures which do not fall within the definition of exhaustion or safety, and in accordance with the principles

of the plan, it is acknowledged that this procedure will continue to apply.

"In the case of a colliery where a report of an examination by the respective NCB and NUM qualified mining engineers establishes there are no further reserves which can be developed to provide the board, in line with their responsibilities, with a basis for continuing operations, there will be agreement between the board and the union that such a colliery will be deemed exhausted."

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