

Labour offers new peace formula to end coal strike

- Labour Party leaders have proposed a new peace formula to end the miners' strike. They could form the basis of fresh negotiations next week
- It is understood that party officials are keen to soften union insistence that only "exhausted" pits can be closed by substituting the word "exhausting"
- Present moves to end the dispute seem certain to fail however in view of Mr Arthur Scargill's reiteration that he will not accept the closure of "uneconomic" pits
- The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, has told Mr Ian MacGregor that he regrets the description of him as an "elderly imported American"

By David Felton and Paul Routledge

A new peace initiative in the mining dispute put forward by Labour Party leaders could form the basis of the fresh negotiations between the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Coal Board expected next week.

But even as news of the initiative leaked out yesterday, the miners' president, Mr Arthur Scargill, was restating so belligerently their refusal to accept closure of "uneconomic" pits that present moves to end the strike seem certain to fail.

"There can be no compromise on the question of closure of pits and destruction of jobs", Mr Scargill said. "We are not prepared after seven months of strike to concede one point on this issue."

The coal board "has to move towards our position", he added in a policy statement unanimously backed by his 24-man national executive.

Although details of the Labour formula were not being divulged it is understood that party officials are keen to soften the union's insistence that only "exhausted" pits can be closed, possibly by using the word "exhausting".

That change can be justified, it is argued, by the union's acceptance at local level before the strike of the closure of two pits in Nottinghamshire which at present produce between them one million tonnes of coal a year but whose reserves are

close to being exhausted to the point of unworkability.

The thrust of the new proposals appears to be to take the closure initiative away from national level and switch it to local level, where union officials and local board managers can argue the case for the survival of specific pits.

The formula has been communicated to the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas), which has been trying to arrange peace talks, and is also being considered by the coal board leadership, according to senior party officials.

Labour's formula would entail a compromise from the union which its leadership has so far shown a marked reluctance to accept, although party officials are equally insistent that there can be no possibility of the miners compromising on their demand for the withdrawal by the coal board of the programme to reduce the size of the industry by 20,000 men and 20 pits in 12 months.

Never the less, those working for a resumption of talks have been dismayed by recent statements by the Prime Minister and Mr Scargill, in which both forcibly stated their reluctance to compromise on pit closures.

The statements were thought to have made the peace process more difficult, although those close to attempts to reopen negotiations are optimistic that

both sides will agree to meet soon.

Labour leaders are backing the miners in their argument that the coal board should revise its production targets after the loss of 50 million tonnes of production during the strike, and that a precondition of any final deal must be the reinstatement of about 500 miners dismissed for alleged misconduct.

The plan's sponsors recognize the serious political ramifications of acceptance by the Government of a deal proposed by the Labour Party.

They also claim that they have evidence of recent communications between Mrs Margaret Thatcher and Mr Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman, in which the Prime Minister indicated that government support for him was conditional on his determination to close uneconomic pits.

Labour leaders believe that a combination of factors, including the growing cost of the strike, the threat of winter power cuts and increasing demands from business leaders that the strike be brought to an end, could make pressure for a settlement difficult to resist.

Yesterday Mr Scargill said after his executive's meeting in Sheffield: "We shall continue to operate in line with the decisions of this union, and of

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New coal peace plan from Labour

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its delegate conference. These are the decisions we abide by and no other.

"The members of this union determine our policy and we resent the attempted interference by outside bodies in the internal affairs of a free and independent union. If this situation was happening in Poland, people would be screaming about state interference."

The union insists that 80 per cent of its 180,000 miners are out on strike, with 131 pits hit by the dispute.

Mr Scargill brushed aside comments by the Prime Minister and other Cabinet ministers that power cuts were unlikely for many months.

The Labour Party's own statement on the dispute, due to be debated at its conference in Blackpool on Monday, has been amended to satisfy objections from the mineworkers.

It is understood that references to a "new" Plan for Coal which could appear to support the policy of Mr MacGregor will be deleted. The section on picket-line violence has been modified to exclude any mention of "violence by a handful of pickets".

The stage is also being set for a clash with the High Court over the union's refusal to ballot its members on the strike. Dissident South Yorkshire mineworkers from Manton colliery are seeking a court order compelling the union to hold a secret pithead vote within 28 days.

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By David Felton and Paul Routledge.

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