

NUM to discuss pit closures plan with Acas

By Paul Routledge and David Felton

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service is taking fresh steps to end the 30-week old miners' strike. Leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers have been called in for further exploratory discussions on a peace formula that takes the final say on pit closures out of the hands of the National Coal Board.

News of the latest initiative came at the Labour Party Conference, where NUM leaders won new backing for their strike in the shape of a statement from conference business managers.

NUM officials are to discuss with Mr Pat Lowry, the proposal for an independent appeals procedure on colliery shutdowns on Saturday. Officials of the British Association of Colliery Management will examine it at Acas offices tomorrow.

The idea of external scrutiny of pit closures that could take into account social as well as economic factors came from the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfireds (Nacods), but it has been urged on the coal board by Mr Stanley Orme, the Shadow Energy Secretary.

However, Labour leaders are taking a lower profile in the dispute for fear of charges that their interest is political rather than industrial.

The move is, being greeted with some reserve by the coal board, which meets tomorrow to decide whether to accept the principle of independent "final appeal" machinery.

Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the NCB, is likely to be drawn into the Acas round of talks, though he has very strong doubts about the wisdom of handing over managerial decisions to "outsiders". Any independent adjudication on individual colliery shutdowns would have to be non-binding in the coal board's view.

Similarly, NUM leaders are not committing themselves in

advance to acceptance of the formula as the basis of a settlement of their seven-month long confrontation. Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the union, said in Blackpool yesterday: "We have all been in favour of an independent arbitrator at the end of the colliery review procedure. It would seem there is no difference between us and

Oil use increase	2
Working pits	2
Letters	15

Nacods on that. But that is not really the issue causing the contention; it is only one of the issues."

It is understood that Nacods has told the coal board that if its meeting tomorrow does not accept the principle of a third party involvement it will activate its threat to shut down the industry.

A meeting of the Nacods executive will be convened after the board meeting although industry observers believe it unlikely that the union would call a strike with Acas due to meet NUM leaders on Saturday. Mr Ian Wilson, general secretary of the managers' union, the BACM, which was also hostile to the idea of binding arbitration on pit closures, said last night that the new proposals were "certainly worth exploring".

The Nacods plan is for four new clauses to be inserted into the colliery review procedure with the final clause setting out the third party influence. The first clause would allow union branches to convene special meetings to discuss a colliery's future if union officials felt that there was either under-investment, or an imminent closure announcement from the board.

Under the present procedure such a meeting would only be convened after the board had made an announcement of its intent to close a pit.

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