

Pit peace talks collapse after an hour at Acas

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The miners' strike looks certain to run for many more weeks after the collapse last night of peace talks between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Coal Board. The two sides had met for less than an hour.

NUM leaders and the executive of the pit deputies' union, Nacods meet this morning to determine their next step in what appears to be a slide towards a deepening industrial crisis.

Miners' leaders last night reported to the TUC on the failure of the four-day peace initiative, and signalled their intention to step up their action to compel the coal board to withdraw its colliery closure programme.

The pit supervisors also have to decide whether to implement an 82.5 per cent ballot in favour of strike, but the coal board said that it would do all it could to keep the working pits open.

The atmosphere was one of deep gloom late last night after separate press conferences by the miners and the coal board, and guidance from the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service, that the gap between the two main parties in the dispute was unbridgeable.

Mr Ian MacGregor, NCB chairman, accused pitmen's leaders of not wanting to end the seven-and-a-half month old conflict.

Mr Scargill, president of the NUM, said the dispute would continue until the Coal Board withdrew its March 6 plan for pit closures, gave guarantees for the future of five named pits,

and ceased to ask for the closure of "uneconomic" pits.

This uncompromising stand by the union after more than 100 hours of peace talks spread over several months led Mr Pat Lowry, chairman of the conciliation service, to conclude that there was no purpose in continuing with his efforts.

Acas officials found it impossible to get the miners and the coal board to agree a compromise formula for the criteria by which coal mines would be closed.

Acas formula

Any colliery not covered by geological exhaustion or safety dangers may be brought forward by either party for discussion and investigation in line with the principles of the Plan for Coal under the colliery review procedure.

The colliery review procedure will be amended to include as a final stage an independent review body whose function would be to consider a reference from any one of the parties on any closure matter about which there is disagreement.

Full weight will be given by the parties to the advice of this independent review body.

The miners wanted any pits in difficulties to be reviewed within the terms of the expansionist 1974 Plan for Coal, by which they understood more investment would be put in to make them viable, while the NCB insisted on its right to manage the industry, including

a freedom in the last analysis to close pits it felt had no future.

Between those two principled positions, Acas could not find a bridge of words that would not have immediately collapsed as soon as it was put to the test.

Mr MacGregor said that it was now up to the leaders of Nacods to decide whether to invoke their strike authority, but he insisted: "They will not close all the pits."

The conciliation service is officially standing by to talk to the parties, and is ready to try and bring them together if there is any indication of a willingness to compromise.

But the NUM and the NCB are both saying that there is no scope for such discussions at this stage, and the miners are privately talking about a dispute that will go into the new year.

Each side blamed the other for the breakdown of the latest peace initiative, but Mr Lowry made it clear that it was Acas that had finally decided that no further purpose would be served by trying to keep it going.

The union put out a prepared text just before 8 p.m. saying that on Thursday morning a document presented by Acas contained a suggested basis for negotiations which was accepted by the NUM but rejected by the board.

On Friday morning Acas put forward a second document which reflected the board's response to this initial proposition which was acceptable to the board but not to the union.

A third, modified proposal from conciliation officials had been put to the parties on Friday evening and had proved acceptable to the union. The board had considered it over the weekend.

It is now obvious that their consideration involved consultation and that, once again, the Government has intervened to prevent an early settlement.

Mr MacGregor said it was "nonsense" to say the coal board had caused the talks to break down.

"I am always disappointed when our good people are kept out on strike on artificial conditions by a group of people who purport to be their leaders. There should be no rewards for violence."

● Mr Charles McLachlan, Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire, said last night on BBC television that policemen are worried that demands for "democratic control" of the force would really mean "very heavy political control".

Scargill defiant as court issues fine orders

Leaders of the striking miners last night confirmed their defiance of the High Court as they went into a fourth day of peace talks.

Mr Arthur Scargill, the miners' president, ignored a court invitation to give reasons why he should not be fined £1,000 for contempt, and his union disclaimed to enter an appearance on a similar £200,000 penalty.

The High Court fine orders were accordingly made yesterday by Mr Justice Nicholls shortly before the board and the union returned to the London offices of the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

While the parties met in Acas offices in St James's Square, the propaganda war was hotting up

in the coalfields. In a special issue of the union journal, *The Miner*, the union declared: "It's war," in a headline over a strongly worded response to High Court fines on the union and Mr Scargill.

The union said: "War has been declared on the whole trade union movement. That is the meaning of the £200,000 fine against the NUM."

"It is a calculated attempt to smash organized labour in this country. The labour movement can give only one response - a massive increase in support for the NUM"

"Our position is absolutely clear. We will never bend the knee to the Tory merchants of menace."



Mr Scargill leaving Acas last night after the talks broke down.

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