
Walker urges Kinnock aid on pit solution

By Philip Webster and Barrie Clement

Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, yesterday demonstrated the Government's desire for a coal settlement by attempting to enlist Mr Neil Kinnock's support for a solution based on the Acas compromise formula which would allow for an independent review body to consider disputed pit closures.

In tones which contrasted with the Prime Minister's "no surrender" statement of the day before, Mr Walker emphasized in a series of interviews that the Acas formula would apply to those pits named in March for closure, including Cortonwood.

Mr Walker was seizing on an interview by Mr Kinnock in which he had said that the Acas compromise would have provided a probability for a settlement if the National Coal Board had withdrawn its "hit list" of 20 pits.

Mr Walker told Mr Kinnock in a message, and went from a Cabinet meeting to repeat on BBC Radio, that there was no hit list and that the Acas procedure applied to all pits.

He urged Mr Kinnock to use his influence with the National Union of Mineworkers and the pit deputies' union, Nacods, to encourage them to come to a settlement on the Acas terms.

Although the two unions' negotiators were in fact aware of the application of the formula to all pits, Mr Walker's emphasis on the Acas formula was seen as reflection of concern in the Government over the Nacods decision to call a strike next Thursday.

Mr Kinnock said last night that the whole nation would want Mr Walker's position clarified.

If he was saying that the proposals of March for the closure of 20 pits, the loss of 20,000 jobs and four million tonnes capacity were being withdrawn, and that the colliery

review procedure as it existed before March 6 was being returned to, all parties would be quick to get round the negotiating table.

For the first time Mr Walker had made an intervention that could attempt to lever things towards a settlement. Now he should take his responsibilities seriously and bring the sides

Coal prices held

Domestic coal prices are to be held "for the time being", the National Coal Board said yesterday, but industrial users will pay 4.65 per cent more from November 1.

together on the basis that the hit list was gone forever and the colliery review procedure reinstated, Mr Kinnock said.

The Nacods general secretary, Mr Peter McNestry, said that he was encouraged by Mr Walker's peace gesture.

He was prepared to attend negotiations at any time, but if they were to succeed, "the coal board will have to shift its position".

Mr McNestry indicated that he thought the move by Mr Walker constituted a change of attitude by the Government, rather than the offer of anything new.

"The encouraging thing is that he's talking this way. All they've talked about until now is winning the dispute and not giving in to the NUM."

Mr McNestry said that he was confident that his members would respond to the strike call, reinforced by an 82 per cent mandate in a national poll. But he added: "We don't want a strike. We want to negotiate."

Nacods leaders in the working Leicestershire coalfield made clear yesterday that they

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were reluctant to join the strike, and expected that some of their members would if necessary cross picket lines.

Mr McNestry said that members of the British Association of Colliery Management were unlikely to attempt to do the deputies' work, which has to be performed under law if collieries are to remain open.

"But only time will tell on that matter."

He said that if they did seek to do the deputies' work the effect would be "minimal". There were not enough managers to cover the work which would be left undone if his members came out.

"If they did do our work it would be difficult for them when normality returns", Mr McNestry added.

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