

Prospect for pits peace grows after Acas talks

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Peace talks in the pit dispute last night set in motion the most optimistic steps towards a settlement since the bitter strike over colliery closures began eight months ago.

Leaders of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers will today discuss a draft settlement of their grievances with National Coal Board that could avert the threatened walk out of key supervisory grades due to begin at 6am tomorrow.

There will be also further talks today between the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers aimed at ending the pitmen's stoppage that has closed down three-quarters of Britain's pits and there are unprecedented hopes of a solution to this conflict.

After day-long talks under the auspices of the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service, Nacods leaders agreed to put to a special meeting of the executive today terms for a settlement of their dispute with the coal board.

Acas went on to say in a statement that was full of caution but offered more hope than any previous comment on peace talks, that the conciliation service had issued invitations to the NCB and the NUM for talks "on the main dispute". It added that both sides had accepted the invitation "and we will be finalizing the timing for this meeting tomorrow."

Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the NUM, confirmed that direct talks with the coal board would resume again under the auspices of Acas today. He added that the union had still not moved away from its original negotiating position, withdrawal of the NCB's March

6 closure programme, a guaranteed future for five named pits under threat of closure and a definition of what constitutes an exhausted pit "which does not contain an economic connotation."

The miners' leaders were brought into the round of discussions by the Trade Union Congress's "three wise men" team of senior unionists who are monitoring the progress of negotiations intended to bring about a conclusion of the long and bitter pit dispute.

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Yesterday's conciliation moves began with a meeting between leaders of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (Nacods) and a senior team from the National Coal Board headed by its chairman, Mr Ian MacGregor. His newly appointed "trouble shooter", Mr Michael Eaton, director of the North Yorkshire coalfield, did not take part in the talks.

Mr Pat Lowry, chairman of Acas, and his senior conciliators were seeking initially to avert the strike by 16,000 pit deputies, due to begin at 6am tomorrow, which would bring the entire coal industry to a halt, shutting down the pits where some 50,000 working miners have been continuing production in defiance of their union's national strike call.

Progress in direct talks with Nacods was reported to be slow during the morning but the Coal Board listened to the deputies' arguments and put forward its own version of a settlement of

the supervisors' grievances. Details of this initiative were not disclosed.

The TUC, in the shape of its general secretary, Mr Norman Willis, its past chairman, Mr Ray Buckton and Mr David Basnett, chairman of its influential economic committee, then arrived at Acas offices in mid-afternoon. It was the TUC that subsequently asked miners' leaders to the conciliation service offices to join the peace process.

The atmosphere surrounding the talks was not improved by an accusation earlier in the day from Mr Scargill that Mr Peter Walker, the Secretary of State for Energy, and Mr Lowry were "liars".

The NUM president said that when Mr Walker had talked about there being only one Acas document produced during last week's round of abortive talks, he was "liar". There had been three documents: the NUM had agreed to two of them and the Coal Board had agreed to only one. "Liar" was the only word, he added, that one could use and if Mr Walker wanted to take him to court over this he could do so.

But Mr Lowry, hosting a press function to celebrate the tenth birthday of Acas, treated Mr Scargill's comment with customary aplomb, taking it as part of the hostile badinage only to be expected at such a critical stage in the biggest industrial dispute since the general strike of 1926.

Acas officials were privately saying yesterday that their intention was not simply to ensure that the pit deputies strike was called off, but to prepare the ground for a comprehensive settlement

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