

Yawning gulf over pit strike words

By Paul Routledge
Labour Editor

Three words separate striking miners and the National Coal Board from agreement on an "exhausted" coal mine, but they mask a gulf that indicates many more weeks of conflict.

The National Union of Mineworkers has suggested to the board that any colliery not physically exhausted or unsafe "may be brought forward by either party for discussion and investigation in line with *Plan for Coal* under the colliery review procedure".

That formula, tabled in the last negotiations held under the auspices of the conciliation service, Acas, will be the starting point when the two sides resume talks next week.

But the board insists that closures should be investigated in line with "the principles of" the expansionist *Plan for Coal* agreed 10 years ago, a form of words the union insists give management an almost unfettered right to shut down "uneconomic" pits.

The refusal of the union to accept that *Plan For Coal* could continue to operate only in a

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more flexible manner has prompted the board to take stock of its next move. Mr Ian MacGregor, the chairman, flew to New York yesterday to visit his grandchildren, arguing that the High Court sequestration of the union's assets would not make it more difficult to resolve the eight-month dispute.

Before boarding his flight at Heathrow, he said: "I think it will concentrate their minds a bit. I think it makes clear that the union, at least the union officials, are not above the law".

Asked whether he was optimistic about a settlement, Mr MacGregor answered: "I don't think there is too much going on at the moment. Mr Scargill's public pronouncements are that he expects a long strike".

The union faces further litigation, from miners in South Wales. Four of them are suing the union for compensation for lost wages incurred during the strike.

Their spokesman, Mr Tony Holman, an executive member of the National Working Miners' Committee and former lodge chairman at Cynheidre Colliery, near Ammanford, Dyfed, said: "We will be arguing that miners in South Wales are not on strike. We have been picketed out by the union, which is preventing us unreasonably from going to work".

The action, the first involving claims for loss of earnings, is expected to be heard in about three weeks. Other cases are pending in other coalfields.

The men will challenge the executive's decision that the strike is official and a new rule setting up disciplinary machinery to punish members who refuse to abide by union decisions.

Mr Arthur Scargill, union president, reported yesterday on the dispute to Mr Norman Willis, general secretary of the TUC.

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● Arsonists who yesterday attacked coal board offices in Bewley, Doncaster, unwittingly helped save the building from becoming a raging inferno, because they smashed a window to enter the building, allowing heat and fumes to escape.

● Lord Ezra, a former chairman of the coal board, speaking to Liverpool's Mossley Hill Liberal Association last night, said: "The Government must recognize that this is a serious political issue as well as an industrial one. The Government should come into the dispute more, not in the sense of negotiation, but on the basis of explaining exactly their plans for the future of the industry".

● The Libyan leader, Colonel Gaddafi, met a representative of the NUM and "expressed sympathy with the striking workers who suffer from abuse and exploitation at the hand of the exploiting ruling class in Britain", the official news agency said yesterday.

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