

Dispute flares in TUC over pit peace talks

- The TUC general secretary and chairman have disagreed publicly about the labour movement's role should today's coal strike talks end in failure
- Mr Arthur Scargill has revealed a secret coal board document outlining plans for the closure of 11 North-East collieries in the next 16 years

- The Soviet Union has forbidden the export of any fuel to Britain as a gesture of support for the miners
- The Prime Minister failed in the Commons to declare her confidence in Mr Ian MacGregor, although it was made clear later that he would remain as coal board chairman

By David Felton, Labour Correspondent

The mining dispute took an even more bizarre turn yesterday when a public disagreement broke out between the chairman and the general secretary of the TUC over the role that the labour movement should play if, as expected, today's talks between the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Coal Board break down.

Mr Jack Eccles, this year's TUC chairman and north-west regional secretary of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers, and Allied Trades Union, said the TUC might have to step in and take part in negotiations with the board if there was no prospect of a negotiated settlement with the miners.

That statement, in which Mr Eccles also accused the leadership of the mineworkers' union of adopting rigid attitudes, was quickly disowned by Mr Norman Willis, TUC general secretary. He said: "Mr Eccles is simply speaking for himself on this matter. He is not speaking for the TUC, I do not share his views."

The disagreement came some hours before Mr Scargill made public a secret coal board document outlining plans for the closure of 11 collieries in the North-east over the next 16 years. The NUM president said the paper proved his argument

that there was a "hit list" of pits to be closed.

The dispute between the TUC leaders, on the eve of today's talks at the London offices of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, caused deep embarrassment to the labour movement, following on the heels, as it did, of the controversy over the NUM's links with Libya.

Mr Eccles is an occasional member of the team of "wise men" appointed by the TUC to monitor the miners' dispute. The other members are Mr Willis, Mr David Basnett, general secretary of Mr Eccles's union and his immediate superior, and Mr Raymond

Buckton, the train drivers' leader.

Mr Eccles, who was interviewed on BBC radio, said: "What we have to judge is whether there is going to be a resumption of work. If there is no resumption of work, it means a failure and we have to examine whether that failure is in any part attributable to the rigidity of our colleagues in the NUM."

He said that jobs in a whole range of industries were at stake, as well as miners' jobs, and "none of us can live and operate in narrowly blinkered terms". The visit to Libya by Mr Roger Windsor, the NUM chief executive officer, had been a "terrible miscalculation".

Mr Eccles did not attend a meeting in London between the "wise men" and Mr Scargill.

At the TUC meeting with Mr Scargill, Mr Willis again made clear that Mr Eccles was speaking in a personal capacity and senior TUC officials dismissed as speculation suggestions last night that Mr Willis had told Mr Eccles that he would be persona non grata at any further meetings with the NUM.

Despite an attempt to patch over the differences, they are the first public indications that
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Mr Eccles: Disowned by Mr Willis

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senior union leaders' patience with the NUM may be running short. However, there appeared last night to be no immediate signs that Mr Eccles's views were widely shared in the labour movement.

The TUC leaders emphasized in the meeting with Mr Scargill, at which it was said there was "only a passing reference" to the Libyan controversy, the need to achieve a negotiated settlement to the "lengthy and costly dispute". A statement after the meeting said that the NUM and the TUC realized that, but so must the coal board and the Government.

A clearly embarrassed Mr Basnett left the meeting saying that Mr Eccles was fully able to make a personal statement, but any statement should be supportive of a negotiated settlement at today's talks.

Mr Scargill said that the meeting had supported the NUM strategy and added that, if there was a breakdown at the Acas talks, he would be returning to the TUC.

The coal board document published by Mr Scargill was marked "secret" and dated October, 1984. It was authenticated by the coal board. It relates to plans for the North-east area and predicts a reduction in manpower from the present 22,000 to about 10,000 over the next 12 years.

It lists the 11 pits that are due to close in the area because of exhausting supplies and the high cost of extracting coal from old collieries.

The phased closure programme is as follows:

By 1987-88: Bearpark, Bates, Brenkley, Herrington, Horden, and Sacriston; by 1990-01: Ashington; by 1995-96: Hawthorn and Whittle; by 2000: Dawdon and Vane Tempest Seaham.

The document says that area plans provide for deep mine production of 12 million tonnes at the present levels, reducing to 4.55 million tonnes without investment by the year 2000, or to 5.32 million tonnes with.

The coal board, while confirming the authenticity of the document, said it was part of a much wider working paper.

A board official said the production cuts and manpower losses were projected on the basis of no major further investment in the coal field, but another part of the document spelt out the area's plans to maintain capacity at 10.5 million tonnes a year.

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