

# NCB ready for 'surge' back to pits

By Our Labour Editor

The strongest "surge back to work" yet seen in the striking coalfields is confidently expected today by coal board managers, as the conflict over pit closures goes into its thirty-seventh week.

While preparing over the weekend for a huge picket-busting operation to take thousands more men back to their jobs, the National Coal Board has let it be known through political channels that there will be no resumption of peace talks until the National Union of Mineworkers abandons its refusal to accept the shutdown of "uneconomic" collieries.

Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the coal board, has written to Mr Stan Orme, shadow Energy Secretary, indicating that the peace process is in abeyance until the miners shift their ground.

His private letter to the Labour front-bench spokesman was reinforced in comments to *The Times* by Mr Michael Eaton, the board's chief spokesman, who said: "Before we can talk to the NUM, we have to have an understanding that the cost of production in mines is an important factor. They have got to give us the right to manage. We have got to have the right to decide whether pits close or remain open."

National officials of the union are aware of the contents of Mr MacGregor's letter, and discount it. Mr Peter Heathfield, the union's general secretary, added last night: "All the indications that we are receiving from the meetings we have been holding in the mining communities is that the lads are standing firm."

"Even if the coal board's figure of 60,000 NUM men at work was correct - and we do not believe it is - it represents less than one third of our total membership employed in the industry."

NCB managers in the North-east expect a sharp increase in the number of men returning to work, after Mr John Cunningham, an NUM lodge secretary at the 2,200-man Ellington pit in Northumberland, publicly announced his decision to go back. "I recommend all members here to follow me on the road back to sanity", he said.

Ellington has been among the most solid pro-strike pits.

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