

Coal board ready to let strike last until March before making any move

By **Barrie Clement, Labour Reporter**

Senior coal board officials are prepared to let the miners' strike last another two months before urging a big reassessment of strategy. The crucial date is seen as March 6, the anniversary of the start of the dispute.

Coal board sources argue that if more than half of the miners are still on strike by the end of February the onus will be on the board and the Government to make a move.

If, however, more than half the pitmen are back at work by then, the pressure will be on the National Union of Mineworkers and the TUC to offer an olive branch. Mangers argue that if most NUM members are at work the union will have "voted with its feet". When the collieries closed before Christmas the board estimated that more than 69,000 of the NUM's

189,000 members were not on strike.

Officials believe that Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, would agree with their analysis, and so would area directors, but that Mr Ian MacGregor would be prepared to "stick it out" come what may.

The board is expecting more strikers back at work as collieries begin to open again between January 2 and 7. Area directors have begun to send letters to the homes of those still out and an advertising campaign in the popular press will begin on Monday.

The management expects that many "new faces" will return to work when pits open - partly to take advantage of tax-free earnings before the end of the fiscal year - officials do not expect to see a flood back to

work like that experienced in November after negotiations broke down.

Traditionalists at the board still believe that the "drift back to work" will not provide a solution and one senior source said it would mean that some pitmen would simply never return to work again. They argue that a negotiated settlement is the only way out. It is now a question of who will start the ball rolling.

The National Working Miners' Committee is determined to encourage the return to work in the new year is sending out speakers to Northumberland, Yorkshire and South Wales to put its point of view.

A spokesman said yesterday: "They have no choice but to go back to work. The stark alternative given by Mr Arthur Scargill is a strike until next Christmas."

Meanwhile, the issue of the four-day week, which has lain dormant for a year, could become an ingredient in any settlement. The board is understood to be thinking of including the issue in any further talks, although it could prove to be a source of argument.

Fearing that new technology could cost at least 100,000 jobs in the industry by the year 2000, the NUM a year ago put forward its proposals, which included a four-day, 28-hour week with no loss of pay.

Theard wanted men to work longer shifts underground and offered to conduct an experiment, but the NUM rejected the offer. A joint working party on the matter has not met since June 1982.

● Mr Bill Sirs, retiring general secretary of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation called on miners' leaders yesterday to stop picket line violence.

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Striking miners praised for work on hospital

By **Paul Valley**

Eight striking miners were applauded yesterday for 10 months unstinting labour on building a leukaemia unit for the Sick Children's Hospital in Edinburgh.

The unit, which is an extension to the haematology department of the hospital, is being built with the aid of a Scottish charity, the Leukaemia Unit Fund (Scotland). Lack of cash had threatened the realization of the project until eight striking miners offered their labour free of charge for the duration of the strike. It seems likely that the unit will open next March, earlier than planned.

Earlier this month Lady Dalkeith attended a dinner for the eight strikers to thank them

for their assistance. She is patron of the Leukaemia Unit Fund.

Their work has been tremendous", Mr Brebner Miller, chief medical laboratory scientific officer in the haematology department, said. The miners have dug foundations, laid drains and done all manner of manual labour."

Their work has saved £20,000 on the extension and renovation work for the new unit. Mr Bill Jones, a volunteer for the Leukaemia Unit Fund, said yesterday: "They have worked five, or sometimes six, days a week since the strike began. When four of the men, who worked at Bilston Glen, decided to go back to work four more strikers replaced them."

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