

# NCB attitude to talks hardens as miners return

● National Coal Board officials reassessed their earlier willingness to resume negotiations with the NUM as more than 1,200 miners abandoned the strike

● Mr Arthur Scargill, NUM president, dismissed the return to work figures yesterday as a "disaster" for the NCB

● Nine striking Derbyshire miners were jailed for setting fire in August to five buses used to take working miners through picket lines

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● The NUM executive meets in Sheffield on Thursday to determine its next step in the 10-month mining dispute

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

More than 1,200 miners abandoned the 44-week pit strike yesterday, prompting the National Coal Board to hurriedly reassess its willingness to resume negotiations with the National Union of Mineworkers over colliery closures.

Managers were taken aback by the unexpectedly-high numbers returning and are placing less emphasis on the prospect of renewing talks.

The board expects to be able to restart production at Kellingley, its biggest pit, in Yorkshire today.

Mr Michael Eaton, its chief spokesman, said: "We are encouraged by the number of people returning to work. We have been disappointed by the attitude of some of the leaders of the NUM over the weekend, as they have restated their stance of 'no movement' from the March 6, 1984 position - and give us no opportunity to enter into a new round of negotiations.

"We therefore hope that the accelerating return to work continues, since we wish to see an end to this serious dispute at the earliest possible time."

"We have two hopes: that the return to work will continue apace, and the fact that there is a substantial return to work will influence the leadership of the NUM, hopefully as soon as their next meeting this Thursday, to reconsider their stance and by accepting the fact the cost of production is an

important factor in considering the future of the industry give us an opportunity to return to negotiations."

The miners' executive meets in Sheffield on Thursday to determine its next step. Board hopes of a change of attitude are pinned on rather forlorn expectations that the centre-left coalition that has consistently backed industrial action is on the point of disintegration.

Privately, however, the board has scant expectation that its appeals to end the hardship and return to work will fall on fertile ground.

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Yesterday's return to work was the highest figure for a Monday since the big surge of November 19. Since the beginning of November the board calculates that nearly 19,000 men have ended the strike.

It estimates that 71,000 (38 per cent) of NUM members are now "not on strike", though in some areas that figure is officially admitted to include all those absent, including men who are sick.

Miners are working at 148 of the 174 collieries; 71 are producing coal.

● Speaking in south Wales for the first time since the winter came to the aid of striking miners, Mr Arthur Scargill yesterday described the news that more than 1,000 "new

faces" had returned to work as a disaster for the board (Tim Jones writes).

But despite the bitter cold, once regarded as an ally, the NUM president appeared to be uncharacteristically subdued as he emerged from a two-hour meeting with miners from the western end of the south Wales coalfield.

Mr Scargill had faced a tough question and answer session behind closed doors after his rallying address. He was left in no doubt that many of the 500 men in the audience thought the time had come to settle.

After his address many miners failed to join in the customary standing ovation to their leader.

Most of the miners were from the Cynheidre colliery, which has been a focus of the return to work movement in the most militant coalfield. Of the 19,600 miners in the area, 140 returned to work yesterday.

In uncompromising language, Mr Scargill said the union had never put one single demand or claim on the table.

According to Mr Scargill, 140,000 miners are on strike, more than when the dispute started last March. The coal board estimates that 71,000 of the 180,000 miners are back at work.

Mr Philip Weekes, the south Wales area director, accused Mr Scargill of displaying "an utterly cynical disregard" for the coalfield's future.

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