

Why the striking miners are fighting on

Moderates seek a compromise in Scargill's jobs crusade

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Moderate miners' leaders are seeking a new initiative to get talks restarted before the National Coal Board achieved its target of persuading 51 per cent of strikers to return.

They want a more flexible, two-pronged approach on pay and the crucial issue of pit closures, but they do not command anything like a majority on the 26-man executive of the National Union of Mineworkers.

And as the traditionally right-wing areas make louder and louder secessionist noises, it is unlikely that the moderates will ever win over the dominant centre-left coalition, which favours continuing the bitter struggle that pundits outside the industry have written off as a lost cause.

In private, coalfield leaders who make up the union's day-to-day governing body are frank about the strains and stresses that the dispute in its eleventh month, is causing. But they will not publicly admit defeat, or its possibility.

That, they insist "would be like betraying our members, who have sacrificed so much."

The furthest they will go is to admit that most miners are ready to resume work, if there is an "honourable settlement". They are vague about what such a deal might be, although they point out that many pits closed in the 10 years since *Plan for Coal* was drawn up, and practically all shut on grounds that could be termed "uneconomic".

Mr Jim Colgan, Midlands area member of the NUM executive, said: "Most of my men on strike would like to go back to work but the Government is deliberately holding the NCB back from negotiations to allow the anti-trade union working miners' committee to consolidate their position and split the union."

His perception that there is a "dead hand of Number 10" on the controls is widely shared among the strikers, who also repeat without embarrassment of sense of naivete that this is a strike about jobs, their own and those of their children.

They say what they mean and mean what they say, and the fervour with which they believe it has turned the conflict into a crusade rather than a run-of-the-mill industrial dispute.

Hence, perhaps, the evident lack of long-range thinking as to how it can be ended.

Mr Arthur Scargill, fund-

amentalist union president, was back in the pulpit again yesterday at three rallies in the North-east, calling on his flock to stand firm and arguing: "It is a question of keeping our nerve and determination, retaining a spirit and will and saying to ourselves in January 1985: 'Thank God I am a picket and not a scab. When the miners return to work after a negotiated settlement they will walk back in the knowledge that you retained your pride and your honour and your commitment as a human being and as a member of the finest union in the world'."

In the absence of strike pay and industrial support in the power stations where it counts, that is almost the only comfort the strikers have. Rhetoric is thin fare, but 70 per cent of the workforce are subsisting on it 45 weeks after they walked out at Cornewood, South Yorkshire, last March, on the coal board's figures.

The few moderates on the executive who want a swift compromise argue that there should be two separate negotiations with the board: through the industry's joint national negotiating committee on pay and conditions; and through the coal industry national consultative council on the situation in the industry and a reorganised *Plan for Coal*.

Both steps would be a bargaining tack towards the NCB. The 15-man union side of the JNCC is a more politically balanced body than the three national officials which has handled negotiations so far, and to talk about colliery closures through CINCC would bring in the pit deputies and management unions who accept that there must be an economic dimension to pit closures.

The board pins its hopes on the drift back to work, hoping that the steady haemorrhaging of support for the strike will finally compel the NUM leadership to concede, at the point of exhaustion, that they must accept that collieries will close when the industry deems them non-viable financially.

However, the predictions from inside Yorkshire, the coalfield where it all started, are that the strike will go on "beyond March and April" because the board and the Government have underestimated the depth of bitterness and determination to stick it out.

One woman and her passion for a valley

From Tim Jones Nant-y-Moel

Mrs Muriel Williams, of Nant-y-Moel in the Ogmore Valley, Mid Glamorgan, where she was once mayor in the local borough council, sees the miners' strike in simple terms.

Nant-y-Moel exists because of coal, and so does the rest of the valley community. To Mrs Williams it is as simple and as serious as that.

"God help us," she said. "If Mrs Thatcher wins this one, then you can say goodbye to justice for the working man because if she destroys our union there will be nothing left."

The little community is dependent economically on the wages earned by the 600 miners who in normal times have to travel to pits away from the valley to earn their living. The two local pits have been closed by the coal board.

Mrs Williams knows that if their jobs go, then no new industry will be attracted to her beautiful, but isolated valley.

In the valley there are two choirs, a brass band, three youth clubs, a drama group and five rugby clubs. There are even those who dare to play football. People help each other through adversity. "We have our culture and our traditions," she said. "We want nothing for nothing. We just want the dignity of work."

"The people in the South seem to have no idea of our problems or appreciation of our



Mrs Muriel Williams: A determined fighter for her valley.

communities. It almost seems that Thatcher is punishing the Welsh nation because we dare to vote for socialism."

Mr Arthur Lock, a former union official at the Western colliery, one of the two local closed pits, said: "Why on earth do they think we are fighting to defend stinking jobs

in the pitch black? There are no lavatories or lunch-breaks, no lights or scenery. We are fighting because our community and our culture depends on it."

Mrs Williams agreed. "They won't break us. Our fear is that once again others will crack and we will be left alone. But we will not bend."

TV man calls for a £210 debt

From Craig Seton Creswell

It was icy cold in the home of the striking miner, Mr Peter Cole, and as he spoke the pathetically inadequate wood fire in the living room gave up the ghost. The knock at the front door was a man telling him he was 10 months and £210 in arrears on his rental television, and the company would shortly reclaim it.

Mr Cole, aged 39, returned to the interview and chuckled: "You asked how we are managing, that is your answer. Sorry about the fire."

Mr Cole is one of only 87 of about 1,000 miners at Creswell colliery, near Worksop, who are keeping up the strike. Fewer than 1,500 of the 30,000 men in the Nottinghamshire coalfield are refusing to return to work.

Why did he not join them and give up the strike? He said: "I just cannot see myself crossing a picket line, because it would be against my principles. I believe in the strike against pit closures. I am not being forced out by mass pickets, or intimidation, I am out because I believe it is right. I just hope the union does not give in and settle for anything less than it wanted at the beginning."

Mr Cole was brought up in Sunderland and became a face worker at Creswell nine years ago. Before the strike started he was earning about £137 a week basic, with bonuses adding a further £40 or £50.

Now, he and his wife live on £6.45 a week social security, and the 75p he receives for each picket duty. The £17 a week rent on their home is paid during the strike by the local authority.

In spite of the freezing temperature outside, the fire in the Cole household is not lit until the afternoon, and is kept going only as long as the wood lasts. Mr and Mrs Cole wear up to four layers of clothes.

"I can see that there are men going back to work in quite large numbers, but it does not really affect me," Mr Cole said.



Warmth for Mr Cole is rationed to the day's wood supply

Pit striker accused of taxi attack

Raymond Richard Liddington, aged 29, a striking miner, was remanded on bail for six weeks yesterday by Ebbw Vale magistrates accused of throwing an 8lb lump of rock through the window of a taxi taking two working miners to their pit.

Mr Liddington, of Aber-tillery, Gwent, was charged with assault and causing criminal damage.

The conditions of bail were that he should not picket during the present NUM dispute.

● An attempt by 19 working Yorkshire miners to obtain injunctions to stop mass picketing at coalfields in their area was adjourned in the High Court yesterday.

Chant has become strikers' anthem

From Peter Davenport, Peterlee

In a hangar-like sports hall, faced by 3,000 committed supporters, Mr Arthur Scargill tried to inject fresh spirit into the coal strike yesterday in defiance of the Prime Minister's belief that the dispute was coming to an end under pressure of the back-to-work movement.

The national Union of Mineworkers' president went to Peterlee, co Durham, to tell his members that in the eleventh month of the strike, and with no sign of any offer of new negotiations from the National Coal Board, he was still confident of victory.

He also appeared to call for a return to mass picketing, which has largely faded away.

Mr Scargill claimed that the

miners' strike and not the strength of the dollar or the fall in oil prices was the real cause for the fate of sterling.

"The pound has lost 20 per cent during the course of the dispute. It's going down so fast that if it was in the winter Olympics it would win the boboggan run", he said.

He also praised the strike action by the rail unions that brought disruption to travellers yesterday.

At the end of Mr Scargill's speech there were queues of young miners and their wives waiting on the stage for him to autograph posters and scraps of paper. The chant "Here we go, here we go" that has almost become his anthem during the strike echoed round the hall.

Man hurt as colliery bus is stoned

A working miner narrowly escaped being blinded yesterday when the coach he was travelling in was stoned and he was hit above the left eye.

The coach drove on to Bold colliery, Merseyside, where the man, aged 37, received first aid before being transferred to St Helens Hospital for X-rays. He was allowed home after treatment.

The bus was carrying 40 miners from their homes in Newton-le-Willows to the early shift at the colliery.

● The former Labour Home Secretary, Mr Merlyn Rees, heads a Labour Party inquiry in Scotland today into relations between the police and mining communities.

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor, From Peter Davenport, From Tim Jones and From Craig Seton.

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