

# Notts miners in secret coal board meetings

By Craig Seton

Senior officials of the National Coal Board and the new leaders of the moderate Nottinghamshire area of the National Union of Mineworkers have held secret talks at which the miners were reassured of negotiating rights amounting to recognition if they are expelled by their national body.

Meetings have taken place frequently, according to one coal board source. On the agenda has been a likely end soon to the overtime ban in Nottinghamshire if expulsion goes ahead at a special delegate conference of the national union on January 30, and an assurance from the board that it will negotiate locally on outstanding pay offers.

Taking part in the meetings were Mr Roy Lynk, the area financial secretary, who is now acting general secretary, Mr Dave Prendergast, full-time pensions and benevolent officer, at least one of Nottinghamshire's two area directors, and senior industrial relations staff from the coalfields.

Senior officials at the board's London headquarters said last night that the union in Nottinghamshire would have to be recognized if it was expelled.

But the board did not want to get involved publicly in any internal union wrangling before a decision was taken at the conference on January 30.

The board was happy to make clear to the Nottinghamshire leaders that communications and negotiations between the two sides could quickly be established on issues normally discussed at national level.

One board source said yesterday: "It is obvious that the coal board and the Government are not going to turn their backs on people who have kept the lights on all winter".

The meetings have taken place during the last two weeks and it has been suggested that

the contacts went to an even higher level within the board.

The miners were keen to know whether the board was willing to reach a conclusion in the Nottinghamshire area on the national pay offer to miners of 5.2 per cent in 1983, rejected by the union nationally, and a similar offer last year.

Nottinghamshire miners who have worked since last March have become increasingly disappointed that they have lost out in the pay round for two years.

The board, in turn, has been given a clear indication that if the Nottinghamshire NUM is expelled the overtime ban in the area, imposed nationally in November 1983, will come to a speedy end.

One coal board source said that if the special delegate conference toned down the recommendation that Nottinghamshire should be expelled and instead perhaps suspended it for a short time, a comprehensive relationship would be much more difficult.

The board has, so far, held no meetings with union leaders in South Derbyshire and Leicestershire, which are poised to follow Nottinghamshire's lead and make rule changes to protect themselves from the authority of the national union. They, too, could then face expulsion.

The Nottinghamshire union executive is due to meet on Wednesday to discuss future plans.

Mr Henry Richardson, its suspended general secretary, who supports the strike, is now working from home, having lost a High Court battle to end his suspension.

● Mr Chris Butcher, known as Silver Birch, said last night that back-to-work pitmen were promised that they could turn to a new "miners federation", based on the Nottinghamshire area, if the NUM takes action against them.

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## Strike entering final stage, says Scargill

By David Felton, Labour Correspondent

Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, said yesterday that the pit strike, now in its tenth month, was about to enter a "final and decisive stage" which required miners to remain loyal to their union.

The first public indication by the miners' leader that the dispute could be approaching its close was being treated with some reserve by the National Coal Board which believed it was an attempt to stem the apparent tide of breakaway movements by areas from the national union.

Mr Scargill, who was addressing a rally in Northumberland, said: "I believe we are in crunch times. We have now entered into a phase which could be the final and decisive stage if our members remain solid."

"If we retain our solidarity we can create the conditions for bringing the coal board and the Government to a position

where they realize there has to be a negotiated settlement," Mr Scargill said. He again disputed the board's return-to-work figures which showed that a further 215 miners ended their strike, a high number for a Friday.

The board said that the total of "new faces" appearing at the pits this week was almost 2,900 and brought the number returning this year to just under 6,000.

Mr Michael Eaton, the board's spokesman, said last night that the return to work was "an inexorable process".

The board's figures show more than 39 per cent of the union membership is at work. Yesterday's figures were regarded as significant because of the bad weather.

● Mr Norman Woodhouse, deputy director since 1970, has been appointed the coal board's director of public relations. He succeeds Mr Geoffrey Kirk, who resigned in November.

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By Craig Seton and By David Felton.

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