

# Ministers leave pit strike to run on until it collapses

● Mine union officials met coal board representatives for exploratory talks yesterday but the NCB side said direct negotiations had not been brought any nearer

● Senior government sources attempted to puncture hopes of a breakthrough, describing Mr Arthur Scargill's latest intervention as a ploy to deceive strikers

● Demands by Labour's far left for a Commons debate on the pit strike were backed by members of the *Tribune* group of Labour MPs

● The coal board said 1,847 miners abandoned the strike yesterday, the highest Monday total since mid-November. The return gathered momentum in Yorkshire and the North-east

Page 2

By Paul Routledge and Anthony Bevins

The miners' strike was left to run on until it collapses last night after the Government firmly indicated that there should be no more concessions to the National Union of Mineworkers on pit closures.

Another 1,847 pitmen abandoned the strike yesterday, the highest figure for one working day since the beginning of the year, and the coal board swiftly withdrew from the tentatively conciliatory attitude it had been showing to the NUM.

National officials of the miners' union met representatives of the board for private, exploratory talks yesterday, but Mr Michael Eaton, the board's chief spokesman, said afterwards: "Nothing following the meeting brings direct negotiations any nearer."

His comments flew in the face of earlier and more optimistic assumptions about the turn of events in the dispute.

Mr Scargill, however, said "It was agreed that both sides should report back on that meeting to the executives of the union and the board and consider the possibility of a resumption of negotiations."

It had been expected that informal contacts between the two sides would be converted swiftly into substantive negotiations on the basic issue of pit closures and the economic grounds for closing collieries that have reached the end of their economic life.

NUM officials, led by the union's general secretary, Mr Peter Heathfield, had talked with the board's director of industrial relations, Mr Ned Smith, and his deputy, Mr Kevin Hunt, for several hours, but their talks came to nothing.

Leaders of the union went on to Congress House for a long session of discussions with the TUC's "seven wise men" charged with monitoring the progress of the coal conflict.

There was no indication after

the meeting ended late last night of what the wider labour movement would do to help in restarting direct negotiations between the board and the NUM.

Yesterday's informal talks between the board and the NUM are understood to have been arranged last Friday. They marked a break in a deadlock that had lasted for more than three months and miners' leaders hoped that they would have been able to report back to their members that a negotiated settlement to the strike was on the cards.

Their hopes proved fruitless, as the Government made its position clear in the Commons.

Senior government sources attempted to puncture hopes of a breakthrough in the talks, deriding Mr Scargill's latest intervention as a ploy to deceive the strikers that agreement was possible.

Mr Nicholas Edwards, Secretary of State for Wales, summed up the Government's behind-the-scenes mood when he told the Commons: "I welcome that Mr Scargill has apparently said he is willing to negotiate, but I note that he has

said absolutely nothing at all about his willingness to negotiate on economic pits. Without that willingness, there is no hope of progress."

Senior Whitehall sources were much more blunt in their analysis of Mr Scargill's "games." It was said that it would be foolish to become too hopeful of any talks that might take place because Mr Scargill had given no sign of talking about the heart of the dispute, the closure of uneconomic pits.

The NUM leadership had seen the steady erosion of the strike and they had decided to try for more talks in order to "kid along" their supporters.

The meeting, sources added, would be meaningless without an assurance that uneconomic pits would be on the agenda and that the NUM and Mr Scargill were willing to back down on that issue.

There is little hope left in Whitehall that there can be or will be an early settlement and it is said that the dispute could continue for months.

The first important stage in the process of settlement, it is said, will be the return to work of most of the NUM's members. But that, it is recognized, will be only a psychological milestone in trying to persuade other strikers that the fight is lost.

It has been argued for months past that the dispute will move towards a satisfactory settlement only when most miners return in each pit, so that the strikers and the pickets are outnumbered by men who have balloted with their boots.

At that stage it will be the Government's hope that the working miners will turn on the Scargill leadership, and ministers and the National Coal Board will be ready to nurture and sustain any moderate alternative leadership that might rise from the ashes of the dispute.

Parliament, page 4

## Tribune MPs back hard left demand for mines debate

By Philip Webster, Political Reporter

Demands by the far left of the Parliamentary Labour Party for a debate in government time on the miners' strike were backed last night by members of the *Tribune* Group of Labour MPs.

Support for a debate on the main "soft left" grouping in the party poses a further dilemma for Mr Neil Kinnock, himself a *Tribune*, who has made clear over the weekend his opposition to a debate and the disruptive methods employed by the far left in their attempts to secure one.

But at its weekly meeting last night, the group decided to send its officers to see Mr Kinnock, to urge him to press the view of

the large majority of MPs who said that the Shadow Cabinet should now be pushing the Government hard for a debate.

Mr Kinnock said on Sunday that a debate would not help the miners. "It would be about the condition of the National Union of Mineworkers and that is a target I do not think we should present voluntarily to the Conservative Party."

In calling for a debate *Tribune* did not, however, endorse the actions of the Campaign Group members, who brought the Commons to a standstill last Thursday, although its complaint was more over the lack of consultation

with the leadership than the actual methods employed.

And in remarks clearly directed at both Mr Kinnock and the rebels, Mr David Winnick, the group chairman, said last night that the personalising of the dispute between members of the PLP was detracting attention from the real issues.

There was no repeat in the Commons yesterday of Thursday's disruption, but Mr Jeremy Corbyn, MP for Islington North and a member of the Campaign Group, put another plea for an emergency debate on the miners. The Speaker refused it.

Leading article, page 15



Mr Scargill before talks with TUC leaders yesterday. (Photograph: John Manning.)

## Flooding brings new weather chaos

By David Nicholson-Lord

The rapid thaw caused flooding throughout much of southern England yesterday, blocking roads with up to 4ft of water in places and damaging road bridges. Several rivers were last night threatening to burst their banks.

As freezing conditions persisted in several northern counties and in Scotland, water at "bonnet level" was reported from Devon, where several trunk roads were rendered impassable.

In the South-east, the AA faced a big demand from motorists as cars unused throughout the freeze failed to start. A spokesman for the AA in London described it as one of the busiest days on record.

The West Country was particularly affected by flood-water. Homes were flooded and small landslides blocked side-roads. Roads blocked or closed in Devon and Somerset yesterday included the A35, the A356, the A37, the A358 and the A303.

A combination of heavy rain and melting snow caused 4ft of water on the Exeter-Lyme Regis road at Colyford, east Devon, and "bonnet level" water at the village of Whitford, near Seaton. Minor roads were described as "running rivers".

A road bridge at Brockenhurst in the New Forest

## Tories set over water

By Our Poll

Conservative back-benchers are supporting Thames Water Authority, Britain's largest, in its refusal to bow to government demands which would mean a 10 per cent increase in water charges.

The Government face a substantial revolt in the Commons early next month when it attempts to force Thames, which supplies more than 11 million customers, to set a water rate increase of 7 per cent higher than it says it needs. Many London Tory MPs are set to vote against the Government.

Mr Roy Watts, chairman of Thames, said yesterday that its board was unanimous in its resolve to resist the instructions of Mr Ian Gow, the minister responsible, to generate an extra £40 million in profits and pay back loans ahead of schedule.

The authority plans to set the 3 per cent increase it has already agreed at its next meeting probably on February 15 unless

## Terrorist alert at Nato HQ

Brussels - Security guards at Nato installations and the embassies of alliance countries in Brussels have been increased following a tip-off that attack-



**Ministers leave pit strike to run on until it collapses.**

By Paul Routledge, Anthony Bevins and By Philip Webster.

*The Times* (London, England), Tuesday, Jan 22, 1985; pg. 1; Issue 62042. (1184 words)

**Category:** News

© Times Newspapers Limited

**Gale Document Number:**CS17141814