

# Thatcher demands 'straight' answer on pit closures

● The Prime Minister said on television that "an awful lot" of heavily loss-making pits had to be shut for the coal industry to prosper

● New talks on halting the National Union of Mineworkers' strike are expected next week as the NUM decided to sue for peace after 46 weeks

● Mr Arthur Scargill, NUM president, said that the union had written to the National Coal Board confirming its willingness to resume negotiations

● A grim future awaits mining communities in West Yorkshire after the strike, the county council reports. Alternative job prospects were "bleak" Page 2

By Julian Haviland and Paul Routledge

The Prime Minister said yesterday that there were "an awful lot" of heavily loss-making pits which would have to be shut down if the coal industry were to prosper, and "you don't need to argue about the definition".

Interviewed by Sir Alastair Burnet for Thames Television's *TV Eye*, Mrs Margaret Thatcher denied that she was insisting on the surrender of Mr Arthur Scargill before talks began between the National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

She could not understand why the union was shying away from a written statement of its position on uneconomic pits. Seven times talks had broken down on that point, with the union leadership saying uneconomic pits must stay open.

She added that was absurd. It was fundamental. They could not go into talks again thinking they might break down, and arguing about what each side meant. "Let's get it written down. I want it dead straight, honest and no fudging."

Mrs Thatcher said that she wanted a settlement, but the board had to manage and had to close uneconomic pits. "It has to make the decision: that must be clear from the outset."

Sir Alastair put it to her that she was saying, as Mr Scargill had said throughout, that most pits in South Wales, the Kent pits, a number in Scotland and some in Yorkshire would have to go. She did not deny it.

"I am saying that we must come to a prosperous coal

industry. There is coal for a prosperous industry in good pits, good seams, good machinery, safe conditions. . . the older uneconomic pits have to be close down."

The Prime Minister said that she wanted to be loyal to the working miners and to give hope to striking miners. They had not been able to ballot, had

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suffered terrible privations and must be worried to death about their debts.

The board's terms for voluntary redundancy or a guaranteed jobs showed consideration for those put out of work, for those who wanted to continue in coal mining, and for consumers who bought coal.

Meanwhile an end to the 46-week old coal strike came into prospect last night as leaders of the NUM decided to sue for peace.

New talks on halting the coalfield conflict are expected next week, despite an unexpectedly sharp definition of the terms for a resumption of the peace process delivered by the coal board.

Backed up by the Prime Minister, the NCB insisted that the miners' union must give a written response indicating that the closure of "uneconomic" pits will be part of any final settlement.

Without such an assurance, the NCB said that it would not

resume negotiations with the NUM. "The issue central to the dispute remains whether the NUM is prepared to help resolve the problem of dealing with uneconomic capacity in the coal industry."

But the situation became confused late last night as Mr Norman Woodhouse, a coal board spokesman, denied that the NCB had sought any form of guarantee. He said that it merely wanted a written response from the NUM.

This protocol issue had not been settled, but it is quite clear from the minutes of a meeting held earlier this week between the NUM and the coal board that the miners' union is now reluctantly prepared to discuss an "historic compromise" that would permit the NCB to shut mines that are not financially viable.

Mr Scargill said last night: "The NUM have written to the board, confirmed their willingness to resume negotiations and expressed the hope that they, like the union, would confirm their agreement to participate in talks without pre-conditions.

"The union have also informed the coal board that, in accordance with the agreement reached last Monday and confirmed last night, if they agree to a resumption of negotiations, the NUM general secretary, Mr Peter Heathfield, and the NCB's director-general of industrial relations, Mr Ned Smith, will meet immediately.

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# Thatcher demands 'straight' answer on pit closures from NUM

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"At this meeting, the union will table certain proposals which it is hoped will facilitate the negotiations to take place and help resolve the dispute".

Earlier Mr Michael Eaton, the NCB's spokesman said that the requirement for a written guarantee from the NUM "was not intended to be a screwer into the floor. The board wants to be sure that the next round of negotiations does not misfire."

Neither side last night would predict how things might turn out over the next few days. But it is clear that the NUM wants to have a settlement, and wants it quickly. The union has abandoned the special delegate conference it had called for next Wednesday to expel the dissident Nottinghamshire miners.

The talks, expected to take place late next week, were set up during informal discussions between the NUM and the coal

board last week. The two sides agreed that the NUM should report back to its executive on the possibility of "resuming meaningful negotiations".

In a statement on the situation in the industry, the NUM said last night "The board and union also agreed that if negotiations are resumed it should be in the earlier part of the week commencing January 28, and it was also accepted by both parties that a resumption

of negotiations should be on the understanding that a settlement must be reached quickly."

"In view of the developments and series of meetings which now will take place next week, the NEC agrees that the special delegate conference convened on January 30 should be deferred."

Both left and right on the NUM executive believe that once talks get underway, the union will make substantial

concessions. In its talks with the coal board earlier this week, the union accepted that a "third category" of colliery should be established beyond pits that would close because of safety or geology reasons - and that was related to economic grounds.

The minutes of the meeting between the two sides stated that the union had permitted mines to close on economic grounds long since *Plan for Coal* was agreed in 1974.

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By Julian Haviland and Paul Routledge.

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