

# NUM and coal board agree on 'talks about talks'

By Paul Routledge and Peter Davenport

The miners and the National Coal Board are to have fresh "talks about talks" early next week aimed at a swift settlement of the 46-week old pit strike.

After a discreet exchange of views between the parties yesterday, negotiations are to resume on a trial basis initially. The NCB appears to have quietly sidestepped a government requirement that there should be a written commitment in advance of the talks that the miners will accept the closure of pits on economic grounds.

National officials of the National Union of Mineworkers will meet their opposite numbers at the coal board next Tuesday, and Mr Michael Eaton, chief spokesman of the NCB, last night made it clear that he expects the union to signal a shift of policy that will permit a full-scale reopening of talks involving the full NUM executive.

The Tuesday talks will establish whether the union will make the "historic compromise" required by the board, but all the signs emanating from the NUM are that it will accept a new regime in the industry with the best grace that it can muster.

One person not involved in Tuesday's talks is Mr Ned Smith, the NCB industrial relations director who has been disgraced according to colleagues.

Mr Smith was the man who laid the basis for a renewal of the peace process during secret "talks about talks" with the NUM five days ago, but his

contribution is regarded within the NCB as controversial although the minutes of the meeting established for the first time that the union would be prepared to talk about the closure of uneconomic pits.

Another 190 miners abandoned the dispute yesterday, adding fresh pressure to the union leadership.

The coal board made clear at an informal press conference in Yorkshire that unless the union accepted in advance that pits would have to close on economic grounds, the discussions would not go ahead. But Mr Eaton, was "absolutely sure" that the miners' leaders knew what issues would be on the Tuesday's agenda, and once that agenda was established full negotiations could take place "very soon afterwards" — perhaps the next day.

Further unhappiness with the coal board's demand that the NUM should accept in advance that pits must close on economic grounds was voiced by the pit deputies' union, Nacods, the leaders of which last night urged the coal board to respond positively to the mineworkers' proposal for fresh talks.

Mr Peter McNestry, the union's general secretary, said that his organization would never accede to such demands and insisted that Mrs Margaret Thatcher had been "after" the NUM from day one. "It has become a political strike. It is clear now that she is involved in running the coal board's business."

"She countermanded an arrangement between senior director Ned Smith and the

NUM. She has total involvement and she is out to destroy the NUM."

There were varying assessments of the NUM's position yesterday, and Mr Michael McGahey, vice-president, insisted that it would not give a written guarantee to discuss closures. He told a rally in Glasgow that the NUM was willing to go into talks without pre-conditions, and he hoped that a principled settlement would emerge.

But neither the Prime Minister nor anyone else could demand that the union committed itself before entering negotiations. "This Government is alienating itself from the people with its demand for blood. They are not having the blood of the miners with 80 per cent of our members still on strike."

His comments came after NUM leaders had given the go-ahead for peace talks, and South Wales miners, who have been the strongest bastion of the strike, indicated to their leaders that they wanted a swift settlement and an orderly return to work.

Confirmation of Tuesday's talks finally came at 3pm when Mr Eaton held an informal press conference at the headquarters of the North Yorkshire area of the NCB, at Allerton Bywater.

He had spent the morning in meetings with Mr Ian MacGregor, board chairman, Mr James Cowans, his deputy, who had spent a second day touring area headquarters in the Yorkshire coalfield. The two senior NCB



Talking about talks: Mr Michael McGahey (top) addressing a Glasgow rally yesterday and Mr Ian MacGregor leaving an NCB meeting in Yorkshire.

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men left without saying anything.

But with the heightened expectations in the coalfield that the strike may be in its final throes, sources within the board cautioned yesterday against hopes of a rapid end to the dispute once full talks begin.

An official said: "It's not going to be over in a day. There are many difficulties to be solved, even when the question of uneconomic pits is resolved. We could be in for many long sessions."

An indication of the problems ahead before a full peace settlement is agreed came yesterday when two working miners at the Bentley colliery, near Doncaster, revealed details of talks they had on Thursday with Mr MacGregor, while he was visiting board offices.

He told Mr Gerry Durkin, a face worker, and Mr Carl Ford, a development worker, at the pit, which has less than 70 of its workforce clocking on, that the 500 miners sacked for misconduct during the strike would not be reinstated, an issue that the NUM at numerous rallies has pledged itself to resolve.

Mr Ford added: "I was delighted when Mr MacGregor said that he would back working miners to the hilt. He said not to be worried about intimidation because men dismissed for such tactics would not be reinstated, no matter what the NUM says."

In Gloucester, Mr Neil Kinnock, the Labour Party leader, said that Mrs Thatcher's demand for a written guarantee from the miners' as a condition for opening peace talks was "vindictive, pathetic, and shrewish". He added that he was sure negotiations would go ahead in the next few days if the Government stopped interfering.

Mr Kinnock described the Prime Minister as a "stubborn Salome who wants the miners' heads on a plate."

And speaking in Manchester last night, Mr Gerald Kaufman the shadow Home Secretary, told the Prime Minister to keep her "meddlesome malice" out of efforts to settle the strike. He said the public was becoming "increasingly angered by the spite and vindictiveness that Mrs Thatcher is showing towards the miners".

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