

# Board dashes NUM hopes of quick start to peace talks

● The coal board has spoken of the danger of raising false hopes after NUM discussions with Acas and the TUC brought hints of new peace talks  
● Another 2,318 men abandoned the strike, the coal board said, so that 43 per cent of miners are now working; but Mr Arthur Scargill said the figures did not represent the surge the board wanted

● The Commons debate brought more argument about the coal board's demand for written undertakings on uneconomic pits, with Labour sensing a change in the Government's attitude (page 4)  
● Some policemen on picket lines seemed more intent on retribution than upholding the law, according to a South Yorkshire County Council report (page 2)

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The National Coal Board last night quashed miners' hopes of a swift resumption of peace talks to end the pit strike as another 2,318 pitmen abandoned the conflict and went back to work.

Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, said after a flurry of discussions with the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (Acas) and the TUC yesterday that "there is a possibility of resumption of negotiations".

But within the hour the board issued a statement repeating its tough terms for reopening talks and spoke of the danger of "raising false hopes".

Mr Pat Lowry, chairman of Acas, will convey to senior board managers this morning the details of informal discussions held yesterday with national officials of the NUM, but that move is unlikely to lead to negotiations.

"I want to make it clear that our role in this is that of a communicator", Mr Lowry said after the three-hour meeting in

London. "Clearly, the NUM wants us to add any influence we can to bring about a resumption of negotiations. We have been asked to convey to the NCB certain things which have been conveyed to us."

He would not be drawn on what these "certain things" might be, but the union is not thought to have proposed any radical departure from its policy of refusing to concede in advance the necessity to negotiate a procedure for the closure of unprofitable mines.

The NUM team went on for further discussions with Mr Norman Willis, TUC general secretary, who tried and failed last week to get the two sides together.

When he emerged from Congress House in London Mr Scargill said he was encouraged by events. The board had sent the union "the most conciliatory letter we have had in months". That had given some encouragement to the union that there was a possibility of resuming negotiations.

He ridiculed the board's return-to-work figures, arguing

that they did not represent the hoped-for "surge" and adding: "Figures don't lie, but liars can certainly figure".

The board said that the drift back was accelerating, particularly in the North-east and Yorkshire.

Mr Michael Eaton, the board's chief spokesman, said: "These impressive figures confirm our expectations of an accelerating return to work. Having been denied an opportunity to express their point of view in an NUM ballot, more and more miners are making up their own minds to end the strike. The accelerating return to work will continue."

According to the board, 81,000 miners are not on strike, 43 per cent of the total, and 106,000 on strike.

The board is evidently relying on the return to work to bring added pressure to bear on the NUM national executive to concede its terms for resuming negotiations. The executive is due to meet in Sheffield on Thursday and there is unrest among moderates at the failure to convert last week's "talks about talks" into negotiations.

In a statement last night the board said: "In his letter of February 1 to NUM general secretary Mr Peter Heathfield, the NCB personnel member, Mr Merrick Spanton, said: 'In view of the many statements made by leaders of the NUM in categorically refusing to countenance procedures that could lead to closures on economic grounds it remains essential that the NCB is satisfied that this no longer remains the position of the union'".

Working miners (Source: NCB)

	New faces		Total at work Feb 4	% at work Feb 4
	Jan 28	Feb 4		
Scotland	90	175	4,355	34.0
North-East	394	906*	6,259*	28.5
Yorkshire	296	555	5,953	12.0
Western	32	92	11,768	83.0
South Wales	18	24	364	1.9
N Derbyshire	54	97	6,070	56.2
S Midlands (incl Kent)	0	15	9,500†	81.0†
Notts	1	4	25,700†	95.0†

\*Excludes 429 NUM workers returning to coke plants.  
†Approximate figure

## Commons stalemate over pits

By Julian Haviland, Political Editor

Yesterday's Commons debate on the miners' strike showed no change after 11 months in the Labour Party's attitude that the blame for its continuance lay solely with the Government; and in the Government's belief that Mr Arthur Scargill was the only obstacle to a settlement.

Nor was there any evidence of a weakening in the will of ministers, as the return to work in the coalfields continues, to wait for miners' leaders to accept the closure of uneconomic pits.

Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, at one moment used words which raised

Labour's hopes that the Government might be willing to make things easier for the union. But the hopes appeared illusory.

Mr Walker was asked by his Labour shadow, Mr Stan Orme, if the National Coal Board and the Government still insisted on a written indication, before negotiating, that the union was willing to help resolve the problem of uneconomic capacity.

He replied that what was required was "an agreed agenda", which he said had been offered to the union through the

TUC but which the union had refused to accept.

Mr Kinnock, who seemed to sense change where there was none, at once put out a statement saying that if Mr Walker's words indicated "a shift towards greater realism on the part of the Government, we would encourage further movement."

At the end of the debate MPs voted by 378 to 200 to defeat an opposition motion condemning the Government for "impeding" progress towards negotiations.

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor and By Julian Haviland, Political Editor.

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