

Coal talks collapse in angry mood

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Peace moves aimed at ending the 11-month pit strike collapsed yet again last night when miners' leaders rejected a new formula conveyed to them by the TUC.

Mr Norman Willis, TUC general secretary, put forward without a recommendation an eight-point programme for the future of the industry drawn up by the National Coal Board, which would retain the management's right to close uneconomic pits.

During day-long talks the National Union of Mine-workers' executive declared that the package was unacceptable and Mr Michael Eaton, chief spokesman for the board, said: "The situation does not look good."

The board calculated yesterday that 46 per cent of the 186,000 miners are now not on strike as the conflict enters its 50th week.

Bitter words were exchanged last night as both sides sought to blame the breakdown on the other.

Mr Arthur Scargill, NUM president said that the union was willing to take part in talks without preconditions, but the board insisted that this response was not adequate grounds for the resumption of negotiations.

The board conceded that there was very little difference in its new negotiating document, other than the tone which accepted that the union had a right to oppose pit closures but within a management decision-making structure that leaves the board with the final decision.

The board insisted last night that the formula, as put to the striking miners and the pit deputies' union, was "the bottom line" in its negotiations.

Mr Eaton voiced the hope that despite yesterday's decision the NUM might seriously reconsider its position and recognize that the formula should be accepted. "I think the TUC was anxious that this was a basis for discussion."

But the 26-man NUM executive took a very different view. Their rejection suggests that the strike will go on until the coal board changes tack or the union loses control of its members.

The NUM and the deputies' union Nacods met later and said they would consult the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service today.

The eight-point plan put to

the union argued that it was of crucial importance it should concentrate attention on the future success of the industry.

On the critical issue of pit closures the coal board paper envisages a need to modify the existing procedure. "In accordance with past practices those pits which are exhausted or facing severe geological difficulties will be closed by joint agreement and in the case of a colliery where there are no further reserves which can be developed to provide the board in line with their responsibilities, with a satisfactory basis for continuing operations such a colliery will be closed."

The key paragraph, strongly reminiscent of many similar proposals during seven abortive rounds of peace talks last year, was the one that caused the breakdown. Its insistence that

Strikers join police	2
NCB document	2
Leading article	9

the board will be able to shut mines on such a basis is regarded by the union as carte blanche for shutting down unprofitable collieries.

Miners' leaders who were meeting late last night after more than 10 hours were understood to have reacted angrily to Mr Willis's presentation of the document, which differed little from earlier board proposals but now seems to have the stamp of TUC approval in its presentation.

Mr Willis went out of his way to argue that this was not the case, but the meeting was said to have been heated after he conveyed the miners refusal to accept in a telephone message to the board.

Mr Willis took the unprecedented step of issuing a detailed statement about his role. He said: "I started informal discussions with the Board in an attempt to find a way that negotiations could be resumed."

The document came out of those talks that specified how far the Board was prepared to go, but it was not a TUC document. He accused the coal board of mis-representing his role.

There was further confusion when the board insisted that it had not received a formal response from the NUM. But

Continued on back page, col 1

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Continued from page 1

which gave rise to hopes that there might be further talks within the union.

Mr Eaton was pressed at a press conference to explain why the board was making its views known in such a manner when it had not heard a full union response. He rested on the statement made earlier by the NUM.

The prospects for negotiations received a further blow when it was learnt that the 10-man executive of Nacods, who were attending the "summit" at Congress House had taken strong exception to the part of the package dealing with closure of uneconomic pits.

That it was argued, ran contrary to the spirit of the deal last October with deputies that does not explicitly make such allowances to shut down "uneconomic" collieries.

Mr Scargill left TUC headquarters shortly before midnight in an angry frame of mind, arguing that Mr Willis had spent nearly four hours at the coal board in further manoeuvres that coincided with the press conference which ruled out any fresh talks.

Mr Willis took back to the board a four-point response which said:

"It is of crucial importance for the parties concerned in the current dispute to concentrate attention on the future success of the industry and in so doing to commit themselves to reconciliation and restoration of relationships.

The NUM recognize it is the board's duty to secure the efficient development of the coal industry and the NCB recognize it is the NUM's duty to protect and advance the interests of its members and their employment opportunities.

The board and the unions will jointly discuss the *Plan For Coal* and proposed revision. It is agreed that these discussions will seek to identify the basis for jointly establishing a developing and expanding coal industry equipped to meet future energy requirements.

"The coal board and the union agree that the future of any colliery/unit will be discussed within the established recently modified colliery review procedure.

"It is accepted that both the board and the union shall submit such arguments as they deem appropriate in accordance with established procedures. The parties agree that there will be urgent talks about the constitution, membership and role of the "independent reference body" which is to be incorporated into the procedure."

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