

# Thatcher and TUC meet over coal 'gap'

By Paul Routledge  
Labour Editor

The National Coal Board last night insisted that there is still a "yawning gap" in peace negotiations with striking miners' leaders, and it is unlikely to be bridged easily despite top-level talks today between the Prime Minister and the TUC.

Though there may be some minor tinkering with "drafting errors", the coal board is adamant that the National Union of Mineworkers must concede the main issue at stake before an agreement to end the 50-week strike can be signed.

That was made clear only hours before Mrs Margaret Thatcher and a group of her senior Cabinet colleagues meet TUC leaders at 10 Downing Street for talks on an industrial dispute for the first time since she took office six years ago.

Mr Norman Willis, TUC general secretary, and six other members of the labour movement's monitoring committee set up to watch and encourage the dispute's progress, will argue that the Prime Minister should "unblock" negotiations towards an agreed settlement of the coalfield conflict, by advising the board to consider possible changes in its February 15 draft agreement.

The unions will say that the NUM has moved substantially towards the coal board's position, and the board should be encouraged to accept changes in its bargaining position to bridge what Mr Willis has called the "narrow gap" between the two sides.

His optimism was not shared at coal board headquarters. Mr Michael Eaton, chief spokesman for the NCB, declared: "Our paper ought to have been an adequate basis for an end to the dispute. We are intensely disappointed and surprised that the union chose to remove some of the key sentences which reflect the reason for the dispute and the problems at the centre of it."

"In the view of the board there is still a yawning gap of disagreement on the economic factor."

But it is understood that the second, bitterly-contested half of paragraph six, which suggests that all uneconomic pits will shut, may be regarded as a "drafting mistake" and reworded to ensure that the miners' union understands that the future of all collieries will be properly considered through the review procedure.

Mr Denis Murphy, president of the Northumberland miners, detected a "glimmer of hope" in the Prime Minister's agreement to meet the TUC.

Another 1,044 men abandoned the strike for the first time since last March yesterday, according to the board. The figure compares with 1,190 last Monday, and 2,332 on the same day two weeks ago.

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