



The Prime Minister leaving Heathrow for the United States after talks with TUC leaders. (Photograph: Julian Herbert)

Walker in late night pit talks with TUC

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Direct peace talks between the Government and the TUC to end the 50-week miners' strike opened late last night after a day of intensive diplomatic moves between miners, the coal board and trade union leaders.

Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, called in the TUC's seven-man monitoring committee for talks after a meeting with Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the National Coal Board, to convey the details of a "coffee and biscuits" summit at Downing Street between the Prime Minister and the unions.

His invitation prompted speculation that the coal board was ready to agree to changes in its hitherto "non-negotiable" draft agreement put to the National Union of Mineworkers five days ago.

The talks at the Department of Energy broke up early today after nearly two hours, and as he left Mr Norman Willis, the TUC general secretary, said: "We have done a good day's work."

It had been a constructive meeting, he said and further exchanges between the parties are expected before the TUC

reports back on the progress of its peace initiative to the NUM executive this afternoon.

Beneath the surface optimism, however, union leaders admitted they had been asking for "explanations" on a number of new points that had been raised during the Downing Street discussions. And as Mr Walker left the ministry he would say nothing more than: "There has been an exchange of views."

In their hour-long session with Mrs Margaret Thatcher, TUC leaders stressed that the NUM had shifted its ground substantially and genuinely wished to have a negotiated settlement to bring the coalfield conflict to an end. It was pointed out that the union had accepted the board's right to manage the industry, and its responsibility to have the final say on pit closures.

All that stands in the way of a peace deal is the controversial paragraph six of the NCB's draft formula, which lays down economic criteria for the shut-down of unprofitable mines.

The board has until now insisted that pits "where there

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are no further reserves which can be developed to provide the NCB in line with their responsibilities with a satisfactory basis for containing operations will be closed."

This policy was under attack from the TUC yesterday, whose leaders argued that it was too tightly drawn and senior coal board managers have privately admitted that it contains "drafting mistakes" which lead the unions to believe that all unprofitable pits would be shut down.

But the pit deputies' union Nacods, which has been kept closely informed of the turn of events, expressed hopes of changes in the "final" bargaining position of the board. Mr Peter McNestry, the union's general secretary, described the Downing Street meeting as "very constructive", and disclosed that the coal board had given fresh assurances about the future of five named pits threatened with closure.

While the delicate diplomacy continued in the capital yesterday, coalfield leaders in the two areas where the strike remains most solid, South Wales and Yorkshire, reaffirmed their commitment to it.

Nationally, a further 376 men gave up the strike yesterday, according to the board, bringing the men not on strike to 87,000, about 46.4 per cent of the total workforce.

In South Wales, another 14 went back, bringing the total to about 400 out of 19,500.

The union's national executive meets at Congress House this afternoon to hear the outcome of the latest TUC moves, and to decide what report and recommendation to make to the 134 delegates tomorrow.

● Members of the National Union of Seamen on three ships stranded at Blyth, Northumberland, yesterday decided to continue to black coal shipments to Thames power stations in defiance of a High Court order.

Mr Jim Slater, general secretary of the union, was named in the legal action and yesterday rescinded an instruction to continue the action taken in support of the striking miners.

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