

Walker rules out talks as miners vote to strike on

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The Government declared yesterday that there will be no more talks in the pit dispute after miners' delegates voted to reject the "final" agreement from the National Coal Board and to continue their 50-week-old strike indefinitely.

Mr Peter Walker, the Secretary of State for Energy insisted: "There is no way that Mr Scargill's absurd and extreme demands are going to be met", and he predicted that more than half the members of the National Union of Mine-workers would be at work "within the next few days".

The board expressed disappointment at the NUM conference decision, and is now working on measures to stimulate the return to work. Only 129 men crossed the picket lines for the first time yesterday, compared with 154 last Thursday. About 87,000 miners - or 46.5 per cent of the total - are working, according to the coal board.

Mr Walker told the Commons that talks were at an end. It was "lunacy" that the NUM had rejected the "generous and reasonable" basis for a settlement put forward by the coal board. "Mr Scargill has slapped the TUC in the face in the same way he has slapped Acas in the face."

There is a considerable undercurrent of resentment in

Congress House, the TUC headquarters, about the rift between the striking miners and the rest of the labour movement.

It was being suggested in some quarters that the NUM national executive had either misunderstood or been misled about the nature of the draft agreement under discussion between ministers, the coal board and the TUC's seven-man monitoring committee.

For their part, the miners'

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leaders accused the TUC of being conned or deceived by the coal board. Mr Eric Clarke, secretary of the Scottish pitmen, said of the package brought back by Mr Norman Willis: "To say this is a better offer is an absolute mockery".

The TUC general secretary was said to be very upset by the miners' vehement rejection of the agreement, which was seen as the most that could be expected from negotiations. This point has been underlined in a letter from Mr Ian MacGregor, the board chairman, to Mr Willis, but the text of the letter was not given to the NUM executive. In the absence of such guidance, some coalfield

leaders mistakenly thought there could be yet more bargaining on the draft deal.

A "serious breakdown of communications" between the union and the TUC was being talked of last night, and it seems certain that the TUC will not make any further attempt to act as peacemaker in the strike. The miners are now demanding direct negotiations with the NCB.

The terms for such talks were laid down by the delegate conference yesterday, which unanimously reaffirmed that amendments to the coal board document submitted on February 17 should be considered as the basis for resumption of negotiations; that NUM willingness to accept modified colliery review procedure agreed with the pit deputies union Nacods should be further grounds for negotiations; and that there should be an immediate resumption of negotiations "without preconditions in an effort to negotiate a solution to this long, damaging and costly dispute".

In the interim, the miners are calling for more support from the labour movement so that they are not isolated. The national executive will probably meet again next Thursday to review the return-to-work figures. Last night, Mr Scargill, the union president, declared "The dispute goes on".

Government asserts headline

Break in talks pleases Tories

By Julian Haviland, Political Editor

The prospect that there will be no more talks between the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mine-workers for the indefinite future was greeted with satisfaction on the Government side when described by Mr Peter Walker, the Secretary of State for Energy, in the Commons yesterday.

Labour MPs were notably subdued, Mr Stan Orme, chief Opposition spokesman on energy, urged Mr Walker to initiate direct talks between the board and the full union executive, which he thought could resolve the misunderstanding which had arisen.

Dr David Owen, leader of the

Social Democrats, drew vocal support from the Conservative benches when he said that continual "dribbling out" of concessions had probably extended the strike which would end sooner if there was now a clear pause in negotiations.

Afterwards, at a private meeting of Conservative back-benchers, Mr Walker was told there must be no more changes in the coal board's position. He promised there would be none, and asked MPs to make sure that message was heard in their constituencies this weekend.

He was even more confident about coal stocks than before, saying that at present levels of production there would "never

be a time" when there would be power cuts. But he declined as in the past to predict when the strike might end.

Mr Walker used the occasion of a private notice question from Mr Tony Benn, Labour MP for Chesterfield, to try to persuade miners on strike that they had nothing to expect from staying out. His words were recognized on both sides of the House as part of the familiar weekly process of stimulating the largest return to work next Monday.

Within the next few days, he said, he expected that more than half the NUM membership would be at work.

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor and By Julian Haviland.

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