'Better to go back to work while we still have a union'

Pit strike is abandoned by a record 3,807 men

● A total of 3,807 miners went back to work yesterday, the largest number to abandon the strike so far on a single day, according to the National Coal Board

● A meeting of TUC and miners' union leaders ended last night after six hours with no serious hope emerging of renewed peace talks with the coal board.

● Nottinghamshire miners' leaders voted by 20 votes to 11 to end a 16-month overtime ban, making the area the first in the country to resume normal working

By David Felton and Paul Routledge

The return to the pits by striking miners gathered momentum yesterday with 3,807 abandoning the dispute, the largest number to go back to work on any single day since the strike started.

Faced with determined government refusal to allow any more negotiations between the National Coal Board and miners' leaders, the number of strikers returning is likely to mean that more than half the 186,000-strong workforce will be back within a matter of days.

Ministers and coal board officials claimed that the return showed an acceptance by miners that the strike was crumbling and there were

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reports from several coalfields of a growing desire for the National Union of Mineworkers' leadership to organize a return to work if necessary without a final settlement.

The South Wales executive is likely to discuss such a move today, and last night a mass meeting at Easington colliery, the most militant pit in the North East coalfield, called for the national delegates' conference to be reconvened to discuss an organized return to work.

Mr Billy Stobbs, union chairman at Easington and a left-wing member of the national executive, said that while miners at the pit, where only 100 out of 2,169 men are working, supported the national leadership they were now "at the end of their tether".

The biggest return yesterday was in Yorkshire, where 1,312 miners went back to work, followed closely by the North East coalfields where the coal board reported 1,282 "new faces". In total 3,807 men were said to have returned, which took the working total to more than 90,000 or 49 per cent of the workforce.

But the board said that the most significant return was in South Wales, where 552 broke the strike, more than doubling the numbers at work in an area which has been most solidly behind the strike.

Mr Stobbs, speaking after the Easington meeting, said that the men's attitude had been that it would be better to go back to work "while we still have a union. This Government does not intend letting the NUM get round the table and reach a negotiated settlement, so we have got to try something else."

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With the return to work yesterday of 3,807 men, the National Coal Board said there were now 91,263 not on strike. This is only 1,769 short of the psychologically important half-way mark. The total pits workforce is 186,064

WORKING MINERS

Area	New faces Feb 18	New faces Feb 25	Total at work Feb 25	Per cent at work Feb 25
Scotland	79	235	5,434	44.3
North East	481	1,282	9,330	42
Yorkshire	300	1,312	8,442	18
Western	23	160	12,111	85
S Wales	53	552	1,065	5.8
N Derbyshire	44	120	6,511	62
S Midlands (inc Kent)	0(5)	4(25)	9,547	80.6
Notts	3	13	25,759	95.4

Source: NCB area offices

Miners about to begin a shift at Dinnington, Yorkshire, yesterday. (Photograph: Charles Milligan).

MPs pass rate-cap proposals

By Philip Webster Political Reporter

The Government's plans for capping the rates of 13 local authorities were approved by the Commons last night as Mr Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment, renewed his warning that rebel councillors could face surcharge and disqualification from office if they failed to comply with the law.

Councils in Sheffield, Leicester, Basildon and Thamesdown, and the London boroughs of Camden, Greenwich, Hackney, Islington, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, Brent and Haringay, are to have their rate rises curbed.

A parliamentary order prescribing maximum rates for those authorities was carried by 267 votes to 184, a majority of 83, with a handful of Tory MPs opposed to the principle of rate-capping abstaining.

Mr Jenkin said that the measure, together with that relating to the five other rate-capped councils, would save £500 million. Without it ratepayers in Greenwich would have faced a 40 per cent increase instead of a 19 per cent cut, and in Hackney the increase would have been seven times greater, he said.

Pound-dollar parity in days, say dealers

By David Smith, Economics Correspondent

The dollar rose strongly again yesterday, pushing down the pound by 2.05 cents to a new closing low of $1.0560. Foreign exchange dealers say that there could be parity within days.

There were no new factors in yesterday's dollar rise, which continued the gains of last week following President Reagan's rejection of action to hold it down.

Some dealers had feared intervention by the European central banks, and the dollar's rise was dramatic when this did not happen.

It gained 5½ pfennigs against the mark to a new 13½-year European closing high of DM3.4480. The pound was forced down to $1.0528 before recovering at the close of London trading.

In New York later it gained very slightly to $1.0565. Spot gold fell $12.20 to $282, its lowest price since August 1979.

The pound also lost ground against the mark in London falling 0.75 pfennigs to DM3.6410. This helped to push down the sterling index by 0.6 to 70.9.

The dollar continues to be supported by the prospect of higher US interest rates, arising from the Administration's failure to cut the on no new information, led one currency economist, Mr David Morrison, of Simon & Coates, the brokers, to suggest that a "speculative bubble" was building up.

News of a record return to work by miners had little impact on foreign exchange markets. Dealers say that suggestions that Mr Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor, is planning a tight Budget on March 19 had no effect.

HOW THE POUND FARED

	London close	Loss on the day
Dollar	1.0560	-0.0205
Mark	3.6410	-0.0075
Yen	277.00	-5.85
Sterling index	70.9	-0.6

There is no immediate pressure for a rise in base rates, though money market interest rates again edged up yesterday. The three-month interbank rate rose 1/8 to 14 5/16-14 3/16.

● The pound reached virtual parity in New York yesterday. British travellers changing money in hotels, banks and exchange offices were getting only a few cents over the dollar for each pound (Penny Symon writes).

In some hotels they did not

22 killed in French pit explosion

From Diana Geddes Paris

Twenty-two miners were killed in a pit explosion in Lorraine, near to the German border, yesterday. More than 100 others were taken to hospital to be treated for injuries, gas poisoning, and shock.

It was France's worst mine disaster since 1974 when 42 miners were killed at Liévin, in the Pas-de-Calais.

An inquiry has been opened into the causes of the explosion which occurred 3,450 feet underground in the Simon pit at 7.30 am, when 923 miners were working. A management spokesman said that an explosion of pit gas, or methane, which occurs naturally in all coal mines, was almost certainly the origin of the disaster.

M Marcel Giltaire, head of the industrial and mining security department of France's centre for the study and research of coal, said that there was a danger of an explosion when the methane in the air reached 5 per cent.

Distraught members of miners' families gathered at the pit head to wait for news. Five rescue teams, each of 10 men, worked to bring out the injured and dead. Their progress was

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Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, said that miners were increasingly recognizing that loyalty to their union and the industry meant going back to work. While understanding the feelings of miners returning after nearly a year on strike, "I think the important thing is that they do recognize that by going back they are preventing further damage to their industry."

But Mr Arthur Scargill, NUM president, disputed the board's figures and said that 64 per cent of union members were still on strike. He said that the board must have been disappointed by the return because it had been hoping for 10,000 men to end the strike.

The dispute now looks certain to run until it collapses after a rigid response from the TUC last night to a plea from miners' leaders for help.

Members of the TUC's "inner cabinet", its finance and general purposes committee, who met NUM officials yesterday, held out no serious hope of reopening peace talks with the coal board.

Mr Norman Willis, general secretary of the TUC, emerged on the steps of Congress House last night after six hours of talks to say that the TUC would continue its discussions with unions involved in the dispute – but there was a significant absence of any talk of renewed contacts with the board.

The "inner cabinet" endorsed the action taken by Mr Willis and the TUC's seven-man liaison group "to facilitate a resumption of negotiations between the NUM and the NCB".

Union leaders noted that despite a "significant shift" in the mineworkers' position in responding to the coal board's bargaining position of February 13, the subsequent proposals from the board, dated February 20, were not found acceptable by the union.

In confirming the TUC's commitment to achieving a negotiated settlement, and in confirming Congress policy on the issue, the TUC committee asked Mr Willis to undertake "further detailed discussions" with the unions concerned in the conflict and report speedily to the liaison group.

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By David Felton and Paul Routledge.

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