

Miners' strike near to collapse in militant areas

● The national executive of the NUM has been called into session in Sheffield tomorrow as hardline supporters of the strike were privately predicting "a flood back to work".

● Another 1,464 miners went back to work yesterday bringing the total for the two days to 5,308 and making the number of NUM members now working over 93,000.

● Rail staff are to face demands from British Rail to ignore union instructions banning the movement of coal or risk the loss of more than 2,000 jobs.

● Unlawful assembly charges against 21 South Yorkshire miners and charges of damaging property and threatening behaviour were formerly dismissed by Nottingham magistrates yesterday.

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

The miners' strike is on the point of collapse in the key militant areas of Yorkshire and South Wales after moves to end the 51-week conflict failed yet again.

National Union of Mine-workers' leaders spent several hours with Mr Norman Willis, TUC general secretary, yesterday but there are no immediate prospects for a resumption of negotiations.

In the meantime, morale in the striking coalfields is falling like a stone. The 75-man council of the Yorkshire NUM agreed yesterday to continue "maximum support" for the strike, but in the secret meeting there were voices arguing for a return to work.

In South Wales, where more than 90 per cent of the 19,500 pitmen are on strike, the mood is shifting swiftly. Durham miners' leaders also voted to keep up their support, but it was acknowledged locally that the men are at the end of their tether.

The national executive has been called into session in Sheffield tomorrow. Even the hardline strike supporters were privately predicting last night a flood back to work unless the miners' leaders produce a fresh initiative.

There seems little scope for that, although the TUC was said to be in close contact with the coal board last night.

Another 1,464 miners abandoned the strike yesterday bringing the total this week to 5,308. There are more than 93,000 NUM members not on strike, but the tally is tantalizingly short of the majority figure needed to give the Government and board a propaganda coup.

Yorkshire miners' leaders voted to continue the strike yesterday, but in the hope that that would assist pressure for a negotiated settlement.

The NUM area council is likely to be reconvened immediately after the national executive meeting. Similar decision-making conferences are scheduled in South Wales, Durham and Northumberland.

Seasoned observers at the Yorkshire council meeting talked last night of a different atmosphere, with various branches warning of the risk that the men would go back to work soon even without an agreement on pit closures.

Miners at the 1,000-man Sharlston pit in Normanton, West Yorkshire, have said they will return next week if talks towards a settlement are not under way.

Mr Emyln Williams, Welsh president said: "I will reflect the mood of the South Wales miners at the national executive meeting. I will reflect the apprehension and also the dedication. The voice of those people still on strike must count

most when any decision about a return to work is taken".

That the militant Welsh miners should be talking about a return to work after almost a year of solid strike action is an indicator of rapidly-moving opinion being kept under control only by the iron collective self-control of the NUM.

The National Coal Board yesterday repeated its willingness to settle on the terms conveyed by the TUC last week. Mr Michael Eaton, its chief spokesman, said: "Obviously what we want desperately to have is a negotiated settlement".

"It is very fair and it ought to be, and could be, decently accepted by the NUM".

A correspondent writes from Wales: South Wales leaders are expected to demand that the strike be abandoned by a national delegate conference on Monday, two days before its first anniversary.

Leaders of the area, which has remained most solidly behind the strike, are to issue a strong "call it a day" challenge to tomorrow's national executive. Privately, they are believed to be furious that the strike is being prolonged by areas where the majority of men have returned.

The area executive meeting yesterday accepted privately that the battle has been lost.

BR to deliver jobs warning

By David Felton, Labour Correspondent

British Rail will today hold the first of hundreds of meetings to warn staff of the threat to more than 2,000 jobs as a result of freight losses running at around £300 million, and to demand that railway workers ignore union instructions banning the movement of coal.

Rail staff who are refusing to handle coal movements are expected to be presented with the choice of agreeing to work normally, or face the prospect of jobs disappearing. The decision by BR to go over the heads of the unions provoked an angry response from union leaders, who predicted it would "exacerbate an already difficult situation".

The National Union of Railwaymen and Aslef, the two

main rail unions, told BR yesterday that they were not prepared to lift their instruction to members not to move coal in support of the miners' strike. A special meeting of the Rail Federation, comprising the two unions, is to be held tomorrow to consider a response to BR's actions.

In spite of the loss of coal traffic to road haulage because of the ban, union leaders recognize that the underlying problems facing BR's freight operations are more serious. The management yesterday told the unions that it needed "urgently" to reduce unit costs by up to 30 per cent.

It is understood that a final decision to take the unusual step of going directly to the staff

to explain the serious freight problems was only agreed at a meeting yesterday morning.

BR has estimated that there are 600,000 to 700,000 tonnes of coal being produced each week that could be carried by rail, instead of the 200,000 actually being carried because of the unions' action. On average 40 trainloads of coal are being moved each day, compared with the pre-strike daily level of 300 trains.

Last night Mr Ray Buckton, general secretary of Aslef, said: "The last time British Rail went over our heads was in the flexible rostering dispute in 1982. That was an absolute fiasco. If they go over our heads this time I am convinced they will end up in another fiasco".

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By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor and By David Felton.

The Times (London, England), Wednesday, Feb 27, 1985; pg. 1; Issue 62073. (1078 words)

Category: News

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Gale Document Number:CS17141851