

Pressure grows for amnesty

Scottish dismissals 'must stand'

From Ronald Faux, Edinburgh

The National Coal Board in Scotland said yesterday that there would be no amnesty for miners dismissed during the coal strike in spite of growing pressure from mining communities, MPs, churchmen and senior police officers for the board to take a more lenient line towards the 205 men involved.

Mr Albert Wheeler, director of the Scottish coalfield, remains convinced that the men deserved their dismissal.

The National Union of Mineworkers has cited the cases of miners dismissed, according to the union, for such trivial offences as crossing a white line outside a colliery, or unavoidably entering coal board property, and for carrying out a protest sit-in underground after the management had removed safety cover.

The union adds that at least one man who was charged, taken to court and found "not guilty" lost his job for gross

misconduct. It says this has also been the case with other miners in Scotland who were never charged by the police.

The miners say the men dismissed often proved to be union officials, committee members or strike organizers. There is a strong resentment that local union leadership was picked on and that the arrests were selective.

As the miners' abuse and bitterness is aimed squarely at the Scottish director, his reputation as the "hard man" of the British coal industry increases daily. It is clear that in some cases the coal board has more evidence than it has so far disclosed about the activities of the pickets.

It is understood that one man dismissed for a minor breach of rules was known by the coal board to have thrown a brick through a window at the home of a working miner during the strike. The coal board said the full reasons for a man's

dismissal might not have been given in his dismissal notice.

Mr Wheeler remains adamant that those who were dismissed deserve to be for their actions against working miners, their families or against coal board property.

That evidence has not been tested in law but could be at the industrial tribunals to which the union has appealed.

The broken glass and damaged walls within a stone's throw of the perimeter of Bilston Glen Colliery are clear reminders that strengthen Mr Wheeler's resolve. People too easily forget the violence and the harassment, he says, and the men who did this damage were given a warning. Mr Wheeler is clearly not going to forget.

His reputation for toughness predates the strike. It was the Wheeler axe that brought an end to development at the Polmaise Colliery, near Stirling.

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shortly after the coal board had spent more than £15 million on the pit. It was that decision that brought the Scottish miners out on strike ahead of other coalfields.

Mr Wheeler gives the impression of being a pragmatist who measures every word and action. In one confrontation a union official accused him of

not appreciating the market for Scottish coal which burnt more purely and had a lower sulphur content than coal from elsewhere. Mr Wheeler immediately agreed but pointed out that the calorific value was less.

Scottish coal does not burn so brightly but that is the least of his problems at the moment with export markets lost and

generating stations less dependent on coal.

Yesterday 4,000 tons of coal were shipped out from Leith to Denmark, the first export coal to leave Scotland since the strike began.

The coal board also rejects the impression that their attitude is somehow different from that in other coalfields. A

Scottish official said: "That is not true. The nature of the cases we are dealing with are ones where no amnesty is being given down South."

But the pressure for an amnesty continues with the Chief Constables of Fife and Central Region both stating that tensions in the coalfield would be greatly reduced if each case was reexamined on its merits.

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From Ronald Faux.

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