

TIME TO HEAL THE WOUNDS

It was not to be expected that an industry damaged by a conflict as intense as the miners' strike could return to real peace as soon as the conflict ended. Part of the psychological apparatus for sustaining the resolve of striking miners was the constant channelling of anger and resentment against their colleagues who had recognized the futility of the dispute and gone back to work. These feelings are not instantly wiped out by the experience of having joined them on the same road; in fact turning on a scapegoat may be the readiest means of relieving frustration. Over the industry as a whole, there have been fewer reports of serious outbreaks than might have been feared, though no doubt many minor incidents go unremarked. But faced with tensions like those which came to the surface at Aberavon and Barnsley this week, pit managements have a duty to secure the safety of miners who led the way back, and to take firm action against intimidation and violence.

For the miners themselves, outbursts of violence towards their fellows can only delay the process of healing, as Mr Norman Willis rightly warned on Thursday. There is all too little evidence of similar wise counsel from the national leaders of the union itself.

The end of the strike creates an unpredictable state of affairs which all parties involved must assess with care. ICI's announcement this week that it has revived plans for a £43 million conversion to coal at an oil-burning power station, resuming a programme halted by the strike, shows that there is readiness in industry to put faith in coal as a reliable source of power again. The fall in the pound has made British coal cheaper in international terms and better able to compete with imported fuels, if only faith can be fully restored. But it will not be possible to take full advantage of this if the industry remains crippled by internal conflicts and unable to restore production quickly.

In the union itself, the return to work has brought to a head bitter conflicts over past and future policy. The overtime ban is being kept formally in being as a bargaining counter in the dispute over the dismissed strikers, but there are already signs that the ban is beginning to crumble as the strike did before it. Many miners are only too eager to resume overtime to recoup some of the money lost while on strike, and NUM officials seem often to be tacitly accepting that they may. Not one but two missed annual pay rises

are still waiting to be negotiated.

The most awkward problem for the national leadership is that of the dissident Nottinghamshire area and its satellites, Leicestershire and South Derbyshire, whose challenge is becoming increasingly confident. If the union leaders yield to militant impulse and try to bring them to heel, they risk driving them out of the union altogether. But this development would be not at all unwelcome to the Coal Board. Any tendency for the union to break up into autonomous sections would suit Mr MacGregor rather well. He has made no secret of his preference for a move in the direction of a devolution of power which would give greater discretion to managers on the spot, and more local industrial bargaining with a smaller risk of concerted national strike action. Recent area meetings between officials in Yorkshire and elsewhere have begun to set up channels of communication by-passing the national leadership. The NUM executive meeting next Thursday has to make a choice between diplomatically retreating from a posture of confrontation which many of their followers reject, or sticking to it at risk of bringing closer a fragmentation of their power which could only play into the hands of their opponents.

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