

TV clash over peace formula

By David Felton
Labour Correspondent

Mr Ian MacGregor, chairman of the National Coal Board, claimed last night in tense live television debate with Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, that at least three-quarters of those miners on strike wanted to return to work but were prevented from doing so by picket line intimidation.

The surprise decision that Mr MacGregor would take part in the debate instead of Mr Ned Smith, the coal board's director of industrial relations, came after more than five hours of negotiations between the coal board and Independent Television News. At one stage it appeared that the board was going to pull out of the broadcast.

In the debate, which was the first contact between Mr MacGregor and Mr Scargill since the breakdown of talks almost a month ago, the mineworkers' president claimed that the board had ignored a peace formula drawn up three weeks ago by Mr Stan Orme, the Labour Party energy spokesman.

Mr Scargill said that the wording of the formula had been acceptable to the union. But Mr MacGregor said the board had not replied to the proposals because they had not been put to them.

But that version was challenged last night by Mr Orme who said the form of words went before a meeting of the coal board, chaired by Mr MacGregor and was rejected by that meeting. He added: "I think Mr MacGregor must have had a slip in his memory."

Mr Orme refused to disclose details of the form of words, which was "reluctantly" accepted by the union as a basis for a reopening of negotiations, but indicated that it was based generally on the *Plan For Coal*, agreed in 1974, and replaced the sticking point in the original draft agreement which referred to the need for coal to be mined "beneficially".

In the debate on *Channel Four News* and chaired by Mr Peter Sissons, Mr Scargill was asked whether he accepted that there had been violence by pickets. Mr Scargill replied that he had witnessed violence by police using riot shields.

In the dispute over the number of men and pits working, the main topic for the televised debate, Mr Scargill said about 147,000 miners were on strike at 130 pits. That compared with the board's claim that 114 pits were on strike with 49,400 union members working normally, meaning that those on strike numbered about 120,000.

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