

NUM initiative not enough says coal board

By Paul Routledge

The latest round of peace talks to end the miners' strike looks certain to collapse today, after the National Coal Board insisted last night that there could be no fudging on the closure of uneconomic pits.

Mr Michael Eaton, chief spokesman for the board, said that the latest peace plan from the National Union of Mine-workers does not mention the critical issue at the heart of the strike, and he predicted a breakdown of the negotiations.

The miners' 26-man national executive meets in London this morning to determine its next step, but after the rebuff to their hopes delivered by Mr Eaton on the BBC television programme *Newsnight* last night there seems no hope that substantive negotiations will take place. The executive agreed without dissent yesterday not to give the NCB a written undertaking that it would discuss the closure of uneconomic collieries in any new round of talks.

The coal board's chief spokesman said that a letter from Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the NUM, simply went back over old ground, and called on the board to withdraw its March 6, 1984, proposal for cutting loss-making pits. It made no mention of what to do about uneconomic collieries, and he added: "I do not think that is a basis for any new negotiations.

"We cannot talk on that basis. We do not want to go in for a huge debate for many hours unless we get to the heart of the problem. It could well be that if we cannot have an agenda that faces the main issue then this round of negotiations will break down. That seems to me highly likely. We have made clear to the NUM that we require to talk about closures, and the union has not put

forward in any of its proposals, and the union has not put forward in any of its proposals the central issue of what this strike is about. It does not make sense to pour money into pits that have no future. We must not fudge the issue.

"The one thing we must not do at this time because we have had a long dispute is to fudge the issue of uneconomic pits. We must have a solution of that problem before the industry can move forward, management, and men together to create a new industry."

Mr Eaton also said the NUM was asking for a total amnesty for 600 men dismissed by the board since the strike began for a variety of offences. There could be no amnesty for serious crimes such as damage to property and injury to people, he insisted.

Kinnock agrees to pit strike debate

Mr Neil Kinnock and the Labour Shadow Cabinet yielded last night to weeks of pressure from within the party and decided to debate the miners' strike in the Commons on Monday (Our Political Editor writes).

Their decision showed increasing confidence that the Government is vulnerable to political attack, and also that the National Union of Mine-workers, having agreed to negotiate without preconditions, has placed itself in a more favourable light.

Two weeks ago, in angrily resisting demands from left-wing Labour MPs that he should initiate a Commons debate, Mr Kinnock said that to expose the split in the NUM by holding a debate would be "scratching at the wounds" of the miners.

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