

Scargill bid to open talks as NCB dig in

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ARTHUR SCARGILL, the president of the National Union of Mineworkers launched a new attempt to get negotiations going yesterday after the collapse of Friday's talks between the National Coal Board and the TUC. The new move came a few hours after Michael Eaton, the board's communications chief, warned there seemed "no possibility of further talks".

Scargill sent fresh "observations and suggestions and amendments" to the eight-clause document thrashed out during last week in talks between the coal board and TUC and rejected by the mineworkers' executive on Friday night.

The move came as leaders of the pit deputies' union, Nacods, spent more than three hours trying to persuade Jimmy Cowan, the board's deputy chairman, to modify the document's wording on pit closures.

The miners' president claimed after contacting senior industrial relations officials at the coal board that the board had changed its previous position that the document was not negotiable. He said the union was now contacting the Department of Energy "to seek confirmation [a junior minister at the department] of David Hunts's statement that the NCB

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document is a broad outline and is negotiable".

There was no immediate comment from the coal board yesterday. But Scargill said: "This morning a spokesman for the board said that the board will consider our suggestions and amendments and as a result of further discussions we have decided to send our suggestions and observations."

Earlier senior TUC leaders had been summoned to an emergency meeting with the NUM.

And at the coal board, Eaton had told reports: "We cannot do better. It seems to us there is no possibility of further talks. They have called for talks without preconditions but it is clear that 'no preconditions' means that there will be no talks about economics at all."

Eaton made it clear that the board does not regard paragraph two of the NUM's response to the board's proposals as any basis for restart talks. That said that "the NUM recognise it is the board's duty to secure the efficient development of the coal industry and the NCB recognise it is the NUM's duty to protect the interests of its members and

their employment opportunities."

Eaton said: "We must have something which makes it totally clear that there is no intention to remove our right to manage the industry. We are not trying to butcher the industry. Mr Scargill seems to be concerned to butcher the National Coal Board and the industry in the process."

Eaton added that 61 coal faces - or 12% of the industry's capacity had been destroyed by the strike. It was not yet clear how many faces could be replaced. Another 80, Eaton said, were still at risk. "Mr Scargill boasts of the dispute costing £5.5 billion," he said. "I wouldn't have considered that that is something to boast about."

Before meeting the seven senior union leaders appointed by the TUC to "monitor" the strike, the NUM president and miners' leaders spent several hours at the conciliation service, Acas. Their visit was partly to press for the agency to set up an independent inquiry into the dispute - a proposal which Eaton made clear yesterday the coal board would reject.

● Ian MacGregor, the coal board chairman, flew to Miami yesterday to visit his wife, Sybil who has been ill in hospital since last Sunday.