

NUM delegates face calls for return without deal

By Paul Routledge and David Felton

The pit strike could end on Monday after the failure of peace contacts between the National Coal Board and National Union of Mineworkers yesterday and a fresh acceleration in the return to work.

But the mass "march back" would be without an agreement on closing uneconomic pits, the centre of the yearlong conflict. There are now fears of a rash of spasmodic strikes when the coal board seeks to reduce capacity.

Executive members were privately predicting last night that it might be left to the individual areas to plan the return to work.

A national NUM delegate conference has been called in London on Sunday. The most likely recommendation from the executive meeting earlier that day would be for a return to work without a peace deal.

Area conferences and councils will meet over the next two days in Yorkshire, Scotland, south Wales, Durham and Lancashire.

Some coalfield leaders are reluctant to go along with the "march back" strategy, but Mr Arthur Scargill, NUM presi-

dent, indicated last night that there was now no prospect of a negotiated settlement.

Mr Scargill said after yesterday's executive meeting: "I want to make it clear on behalf of the NUM that it is the unanimous view of this executive, with right, left and centre views being expressed, that there is no way that this executive committee or the

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three full-time officials will ever be a party to signing a document that would result in the closure of pits, axing of jobs and destruction of communities".

He was speaking in Sheffield after renewed telephone contacts with the coal board, offering new talks on the basis that the miners would accept the modified colliery review procedure accepted by the pit deputies union, Nacods, yielded no response.

The choices facing delegates

are likely to be a return on a national basis; a return under rule 41, by each individual area as the dispute was called under that rule; or the delegates could reaffirm support for the strike.

That last option was dismissed as unrealistic by militant activists who believe it would lead to a massive return on Monday.

Union leaders are canvassing a return without a deal with one eye on the drift back, which yesterday saw another 1,114 strikers returning, ten times more than on the same day last week. There are more than 95,000 miners at work, or 51 per cent of the total, according to the board.

One of the strikers' most consistent champions, Dr David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, called last night on them to go back. Speaking on a Channel 4 programme to be transmitted on March 16, he said: "I think it is a question of the miners simply accepting the fact that they have lost and accepting the terms which seem to me not unreasonable."

The coal board refused to comment last night.

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