

50p pit levy is rejected in ballot

By David Felton
Labour Correspondent

The first opportunity given to miners to express their views in a ballot on the conduct of the 12-month coal dispute has resulted in an embarrassing defeat for the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers.

Figures released yesterday showed that in the ballot, called by the union executive to authorise a 50p a week levy to support families of miners dismissed during the strike, 46 per cent voted in favour with 56 per cent rejecting the levy. Of an NUM membership of 186,000 only 27.1 per cent backed the executive.

Mr Arthur Scargill, the union's president, was in Moscow yesterday but Mr Peter Heathfield, the general secretary, said the ballot result was "disappointing but not unexpected". Leaders of working miners hailed the result as a condemnation of the leadership's tactics during the strike.

The complete voting figures were: For the levy 50,429; against 58,721, on a 58.7 per cent poll. Areas including Nottinghamshire and South Derbyshire representing more than 20 per cent of the membership boycotted the ballot, otherwise the majority against the executive would have been much higher.

The results will be reported to tomorrow's meeting in Sheffield of the union executive, which is also expected to take steps to end the 17-month overtime ban called in protest at the 1983 5.2 per cent pay offer. A decision to end the ban would clear the way for the National Coal Board to pay last year's increase and open discussions on this year's pay, where it has made an identical offer of 5.2 per cent already accepted by the other two mining unions.

The Scottish area of the union recorded a 75 per cent vote in support of the levy, which is hardly surprising as the board's Scottish area director Mr Albert Wheeler has taken a hard line against re-instatement of dismissed miners. In other areas miners are being re-employed after examinations of their dismissals, but the total of those not re-employed is still thought to be between 300 and 400.

NUM officials last night refused to give a detailed breakdown of the ballot votes but it is believed that areas of the union supporting the executive were Yorkshire, South Wales, Scotland, Kent, Durham and the Scottish craftsmen, but in many areas the "yes" vote was narrow.

● Mr Scargill said on his return to London last night that the result was disappointing. But he added that the Union would continue to fight for reinstatement and that unless that happened the coal board could expect to face problems.

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