

Scargill in clash on impact of ban

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Mr Arthur Scargill, left-wing president of the National Union of Mineworkers, last night clashed publicly with officials of the National Coal Board over the true impact of the pitmen's 11-week overtime ban.

The unprecedented sharp exchange took place in an anteroom in coal board headquarters shortly after management admitted that the industry will now lose more than £200m after grants and subsidies in the present financial year.

The senior official who disclosed the figure dismissed Mr Scargill's claim that the overtime ban had cost the industry 5.5 million tonnes in lost production. Only 3.6 million tonnes were directly attributable to the ban, he said.

Mr Scargill stormed back into the room and said: "We know exactly what the losses are." The spokesman retorted: "That will be the big question - who they believe." The union president turned on his heel saying: "It will indeed."

The public exchange came after three hours of private talks between the mining unions and the board, headed by Mr Ian McGregor, its chairman, which failed to produce any new moves to end the growing crisis

in the industry, and appeared to stoke up the personal bitterness between the two leaders.

Mr Scargill accused Mr MacGregor of having a secret meeting with Mrs Margaret Thatcher on December 18 to discuss the worsening situation. The coal board chairman denies having any such discussion, but the miners' leader claimed: "They have suddenly come to the conclusion that they are not dealing with the steel industry or the motor industry, or even United States trade unionism. They have a whole new ball game on their hands.

The miners, he said, were inflicting maximum damage on the coal board at minimum damage to themselves.

The verbal brawl over how much damage the industry is sustaining started when coal board mining engineers gave an up-to-date report on output. Production is lower than at the same time last year by 5.5 million tonnes. The board says that 1.5 million tonnes of this was lost before the overtime ban started. Mr Scargill says that his shorthand note-taker took down what he heard, that the whole of the shortfall is attributable to the industrial action.