

A bitter war to lose

There is an air of desperation about the coal strike. The bitterness of miner against miner on the picket lines, the mob-like hostility that has forced the National Coal Board chairman, Mr Ian MacGregor, to forsake his own pit yards, and the contempt for the law all point to a reckless last stand against economic and political forces that have prevailed in every other major state industry.

These are very different days from those of the great strikes of 1972 and 1974, when there was substantial public support for men seen to be fighting for a proper reward for a dirty and dangerous job. If there is any parallel, it is with the equally bitter steel strike of 1980 which permanently weakened the main steel union and left it incapable of stemming the tide of plant closures and job losses.

As with the steel strike, the initial trigger for the dispute was pay. But the conflict in the coal industry has shifted (as its promoters wished) into the wider arena of the future of the industry and that is why it is a war that the miners must surely find they cannot win.

When they struck in the early 1970s, their pay claims could eventually be met by a negotiated compromise, however damaging the industrial action had been. When they struck again in 1981 over an ineptly presented coal board "hit list" of 24 pit closures, their demands could be accommodated



Miner against miner,
Scargill versus MacGregor:
Paul Routledge reports on the showdown at the coal face



by withdrawing the list and pumping hundreds of millions of pounds into the industry to keep open uneconomic pits - most of which have, incidentally since closed.

What scope is there for a compromise this time round? None, it would seem. By insisting on an end to all pit closures except on grounds of seam exhaustion, the National Union of Mineworkers is effectively demanding the right to manage the industry - a demand that no management and no government could concede.

The coal industry is producing more than it can sell, and proposes to close pits with the capacity of some four million tonnes in the coming financial year, roughly the equivalent of 20 pits employing 20,000 men. Most of those redundancies would be voluntary, with

pitmen over 21 eligible for £1,000 for each year of service.

The coal board believes that if the redundancy lists could be opened, they would be oversubscribed. But the battle is not being fought on the NCB's terms. It is being fought on the ideological battleground chosen by the NUM, and most cogently expressed by Mr Arthur Scargill in his first presidential address: "The first priority for the union is to protect the coal industry from the ravages of the market mechanism, the short-sightedness of politicians and the deliberate political decisions designed to destroy our industry, jobs and communities. If we do not save our pits from closure, then all our other struggles become meaningless! I do not subscribe to the philosophy of John L Lewis who encouraged contraction so that the wages of these who are left could be

raised. A contracting industry is a negative force with negative consequences all round."

This is the fundamentalist doctrine that fires the revolutionary guards of the NUM now roaming the moderate coalfields to "picket out" the pits where the men are proving indifferent to the Scargill line. The message is often unwelcome, and a gap is clearly opening between the activists and the rank and file.

The management's dilemma is how to get the silent majority to speak up and pull the industry back from the brink of a long and damaging conflict. Secret balloting that began yesterday in Lancashire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, North Wales and the Midlands provides an escape route for those who want to stay at work, though if the pickets stay put (however unlawfully), the ingrained habit of not crossing a picket line could still prevail.

In an adroit move plainly designed to yield a heavy "No" vote in the ballots, the board has sent a special issue of its monthly newspaper, *Coal News*, to all 180,000 miners, setting out the lump sums they can expect for being made redundant. The offer ranges from £5,217 for a 21-year-old to £36,480 for a man aged 49, assuming average weekly earnings of £165.

So it will come down to a contest between hard cash and union loyalty. In the past, money has talked louder than loyalty.