

Ukrainian miners stage warning strike

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IUM

MORE than 100,000 miners in the Donetsk region of the Ukraine yesterday staged what they called a 24-hour warning strike after negotiations with the Ukrainian government for a pay increase failed.

A spokesman said that, although economic demands top the agenda, earlier political demands - including calls for the resignation of President Mikhail Gorbachev, and the nationalisation of Communist Party property - still stand.

Miners in some pits stopped work for the day, while others disrupted shipping by refusing to load coal. Eighty per cent of the miners in the Karaganda basin in

Kazakhstan have joined the strike. Miners in the Kuzbass region of western Siberia have called a one-day strike next week, calling for higher pay and the resignation of Mr Gorbachev. The Kuzbass, the Donbass and the Karaganda basin are the three most important mining regions in the Soviet Union.

However, the Soviet government yesterday agreed to discuss pay increases and political changes after the Independent Union of Miners (IUM) launched the nationwide strike, officials said.

The Ukrainian government wrested control of pits on its territory from the central government

in January. Last week, it rejected calls for a doubling of pay and early pensions for its miners.

About a quarter of the 600,000 miners in the Donbass - the Donetsk basin - joined the strike. A Donetsk strike committee member, Nikolai Volynko, said yesterday: "It would, of course, have been better if all the pits had gone out, but we are pleased with the results." Vitold Fokin, the Ukrainian Prime Minister, however, told parliament that the strike had failed.

Mr Fokin, a former mining engineer, made an unprecedented appearance on Ukrainian television after the breakdown in nego-

From Susan Viets
in Kiev

tiations with the miners on Thursday. Warning of economic chaos, he said: "If the miners strike, two weeks from now power stations will shut down and in two days the coke industry will stop... There won't be enough coal to keep schools and hospitals going." Mr Fokin also emphasised that "our people for the first time are receiving an historical chance to attain real status. To achieve this, everyone should first of all be a citizen of his homeland, a real patriot." His emotional appeal ap-

peared to have swayed some miners, but can do nothing to eradicate the squalid conditions in which Donbass miners are forced to live. Last summer, water was rationed in Donetsk after local rivers were contaminated with phenol.

While the miners' monthly salary is already double the national average, Ukraine raised prices on consumer durables by 16 per cent in January and will increase prices further in the coming months. Miners say they need higher wages to offset the increase in the cost of living and as compensation for working in the Soviet Union's hottest, deepest and most dangerous pits.

Last month the Ukrainian government announced a 12bn rouble (£12bn) subsidy for the mining industry. Mr Fokin complained that productivity in the mines over the past few years has dropped to the 1958 level and said that the miners' pay demand was unrealistic as it would cost the republic 5bn roubles. The current republic budget deficit is 11bn roubles.

The Donbass regional strike committee yesterday said it planned to negotiate with the government during the next 10 days. But it warned that, if talks fail, it will call for an all-out strike beginning on 11 March. The Donbass saw some of the biggest strikes

that the Soviet Union has seen in summer of 1989. Last summer, President Gorbachev warned that strikes could have serious consequences for the country. The strikes will be the first nationwide test of strength for the 80,000-member IUM, which was formed last autumn. The strikes of 1989 forced concessions from the government, many of which have not been fulfilled. One strike committee in Donetsk said yesterday: "We have been dragged through the dirt so many times. We are ready for anything now."

In the Kuzbass region, other demands include the depoliticisation of the army and the KGB.