

Labour ends free higher education

By Cath Fletcher,
Campaign for Free
Education

THE New Labour government has done what the Tories wanted but did not dare do: they have abolished free university education.

On 23 July David Blunkett announced New Labour's intention to scrap student maintenance grants, and introduce tuition fees of up to £1,000 a year for undergraduates. As from 1998, each student must find at least £15,000 — that is, go into debt to get through a degree course.

This is anti-working class legislation of the worst sort. The abolition of grants and free tuition will inevitably deter working-class students from entering higher education. Many will simply not go to university. Many who do will be forced to stay on in their parents' homes. Legions of students will be forced to take up badly paid part-time jobs. Many will choose training courses that lead quickly to jobs, rather than the more rewarding academic courses they would choose if they had a choice. New Labour has deprived unknown thousands of poor students of such a chance.

The government has introduced



CFE pickets the Department of Education

these proposals under cover of the Dearing Report on the future of higher education. Ron Dearing was called in by the Tory government in May 1996 to "solve the crisis in higher education". Conveniently for both Labour and the Tories, that manoeuvre kept the issue off the General Election agenda. It says a great deal about the state of British democracy that a decision like this can be made three months after a General Election in which not a word was said about it!

Both parties are well aware that cutting higher education is a dangerous game — especially given its importance to their prized middle-class supporters in

"Middle England". Even the Tories have, opportunistically, criticised the decision.

The last time a government tried to introduce tuition fees — the Tories, when Keith Joseph was education secretary in 1984 — it was defeated by a huge public campaign led by the National Union of Students. Students, parents and the education unions were all involved. This time round, however, the situation is different.

This is a New Labour government, and NUS is led

by New Labour Students. The NUS leadership — who might have fought a Tory decision such as New Labour has taken — are in an untenable position. On one side, they are under pressure from their political paymasters in the government not to derail Blunkett's plans for tuition fees. On the other, they are under pressure from students and student unions to put up a fight. And they are aware that an active, democratic campaign against fees could bring into the NUS a whole new layer of activists who would pose a real threat to their control of the union.

The current situation is a major opportunity for the left in NUS to build a base of activists in colleges around the country — students who are prepared to take on the government over their scrapping of grants and to take on their own union bureaucracy at a local and national level.

The Campaign for Free Education is demanding that NUS holds a national demonstration. CFE has called a demonstration for 26 November. CFE is offering to make it an official NUS demonstration if the NUS will give its support. CFE is also organising local and regional action around the country. A major demonstration is being called with CFE backing by Newcastle University on 5 November for students in the north.

● Further details: Helen Graysham, Newcastle University Union Society, King's Walk, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 8QT or phone Cath on 0958 556756.

National demonstration, Wed 29 October, London

30 Years of a Woman's Right to Choose

By Anita Goldsmith,
NUS Women's Officer

THIS October marks the 30th anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act, which for the first time gave women in Britain access to safe, legal abortion.

It was a hard fought-for victory and gave millions of women more choice and control over their reproductive lives. But, in the last period,

we have seen increased activity by the anti-abortion lobby, and cuts in the Health Service which make it harder to exercise our right to choice.

The NUS Women's Campaign has called a national, torchlit demonstration in London, and rally at Conway Hall to mark the anniversary of the Act. Speakers include Audrey Wise MP.

● Details: Anita, 0171-561 6503.