



As Dearing reports Fight for Free Education!

THE Dearing Committee was set up by the Tories to keep the crisis in higher education off the election agenda. It reports shortly. Almost certainly it will recommend tuition fees for students in higher education. This is its solution to the years of chronic underfunding which have led to course cuts, redundancies, rent rises, understocked libraries and severe student hard-

ship. But tuition fees will force students *further* into debt.

Many working class people will rule out university, full stop. Higher education will return to its old state — where those from well-off backgrounds can afford it and the rest are excluded.

We don't know exactly what proposals will be put forward, or what will appear in the government's response. But certain things are fairly predictable.

A longer-term loan will be available to students to cover maintenance and fees. This will be privatised (Gordon Brown couldn't possibly increase the budget deficit), it might be means-tested (there just isn't enough money to give everyone a loan), and it will very likely be subject to commercial interest rates. Tuition fees will be charged — the question is how much they will be (£1,000 flat rate per year is a popular figure) and whether they will differ between elite and other institutions and courses.

Tony Blair and David Blunkett have ruled out increased state funding for higher education. Students are going to have to pay up. The Blairites argue that this is right — after all students benefit financially

from their education. But education should be free to all as a right — not a commodity to be bought and sold as a 'good investment'.

The response of the so-called 'leadership' of the student movement to the threat of tuition fees has been pathetic. The Blairite Labour Students who run the National Union of Students have just about brought themselves to mention the words 'national demonstration', but only possibly and subject to a plebiscite of student union presidents.

Labour Students are in a difficult position. To keep power in NUS they must be seen to oppose fees. But to satisfy their puppetmasters Blair and Blunkett they must keep the student movement quiet so that New Labour can bring in fees without a fight.

There is a real opportunity for the student left to organise and build a fight against tuition fees which will mobilise students at a grass-roots level. The Campaign for Free Education is taking up this challenge, organising students in local and national action against fees.

This battle has the potential to transform the student movement, and set the standard in the fight to make Labour deliver — we must meet this challenge.

Conference

We need free trade unions!

Saturday 19 July, Liverpool

BRITAIN HAS the least liberal trade union laws in the developed world... and Tony Blair wants to keep it that way.

Liverpool UNISON, in conjunction with the Welfare State Network, has called a conference to help organise the fight against the anti-union laws.

● Free Trade Unions Conference, Liverpool City UNISON, 4th Floor, Produce Exchange, 8 Victoria Street, Liverpool L2 6QJ. Tel. 0151-236 1944.

● Welfare State Network, 183 Queen's Crescent, London NW5 4DS. Tel. 0171-639 5068.