

# Dockers of the world

**Locked-out Liverpool docker Mick Curran explains why and how the dockers have linked up internationally in their fight for trade union rights.**

WE were sacked after we refused to cross a picket line on 28 September 1995. To understand why this happened you have to go back to 1989, when an Act of Parliament abolished the National Dock Labour Scheme.

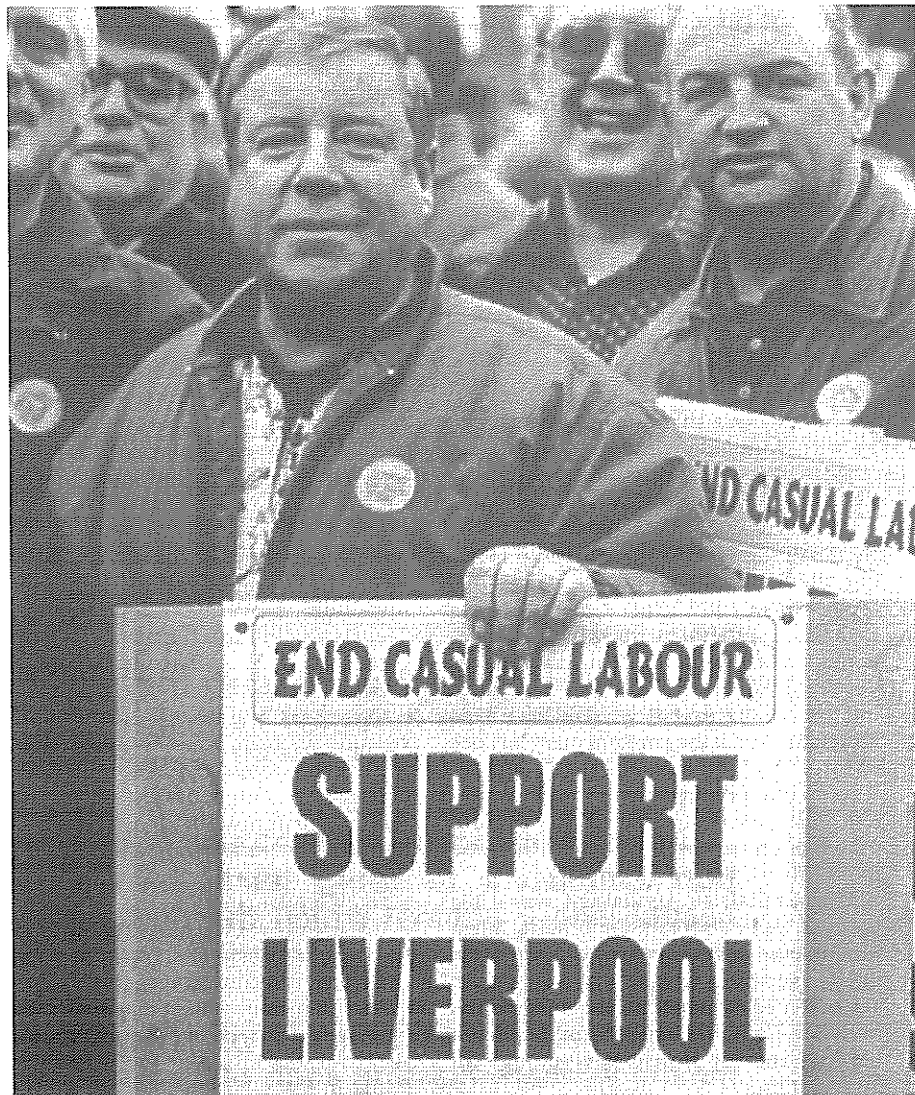
The labour force in all the other major ports was made redundant in 1989 with payments of £35,000 each. Some of the money came from tax-payers. A new labour force was employed, and it was unorganised.

After 1989 Liverpool was the only port in the country with trade union labour and former registered dock workers. The average age of dockers in Liverpool is 53. No one has worked there for less than 20 years.

In 1990 the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company realised they had made a mistake in not making the Liverpool dockers redundant: we were still organised. But in 1991 they also realised they had shed too many men from the industry — they needed more men for the general cargo area of the port. Because of unemployment in the area, the TGWU agreed to 30 young men being taken on. MDHC set up a new company, called Torside, to employ the men.

Some of us knew these developments signalled the gradual introduction of casual labour. Within eighteen months, 80 lads had been taken on.

Later Torside said they didn't have work for 80 men and wanted to make 20 redundant, who would then be employed on a casual basis. The Torside lads said they



**Liverpool dockers: fighting so that younger men will not have to accept casual labour**

weren't having this and they requested an official trade union ballot for industrial action.

Three days before the end of the period of 28 days notice for action the company withdrew the redundancies. But a week after the 28 days notice was up, an incident occurred. A shift was going to go three-quarters of an hour over time (we have to work on a job until it is finished). Payment is made in a 2 hour block, so the men were expecting 2 hours' pay. But management said "there's 40 minutes' work there and you'll get paid an hour's pay for it". All the lads refused to do the work. The

next day — Tuesday 26th September — all 80 men were sacked.

Some of these lads had fathers working at the Seaforth Container Terminal 3 miles away. They put a picket on the Seaforth gate on morning of the 28th. Naturally the Seaforth men didn't cross the picket line.

On the evening of the 28th the Dock Company dispatched motor cycle couriers to the entire labour force, with letters saying that if we didn't return to work by 12 o'clock on the 29th we would be sacked, because we were "in breach of contract".

Less than 24 hours later, on the 29th, 200 of the 350 — now sacked — workers

# unite!

at Seaforth received individual contracts. They were told if they signed these and returned to work no later than 2 October, their terms and conditions would be honoured. Of course, terms and conditions would from then on be decided without collective arrangements with the union. They wanted 200 men to cross a picket line, leaving 150 of their comrades outside the gate! They wanted them to accept that there would be no union recognition!

The company would have us believe these contracts were drawn up in the space of twelve hours. I know we're living in a computer age — but that's ridiculous. The contracts were already in place. They planned it like that.

The background to this issue goes back to 1994. The company derecognised TGWU stewards for 10 months. Then they came to dockers on the Seaforth Terminal with new contracts. We could not get agreement on these. After a while the company said they would implement the contracts anyway. They put the final contracts into an envelope along with our 90 days' notice! It was like putting a gun to our heads — we felt we had no choice but to sign these contracts.

Our conditions got worse. You had to work 117 hours over three weeks. Overtime was only paid if you worked more than 117 hours. If there were no ships in one week you would only work perhaps 20 hours. The next week you could be working 60 hours. Plus we had to work Saturday and Sunday. They've been trying to make our job more "casual" for a while.

Ten days after we were sacked MDHC brought in a strike-breaking firm called Drake Port Services. These people go round a lot of industries, bringing in scabs, and they're spreading like a cancer.

We then got another letter from the Dock Company, saying they had hired Drake, and we could apply to them for our job back. At £3000 a year less!

Because of the anti-trade union laws we haven't had a lot of physical support from docks around the country. We've had to go outside of Britain for any physical support. We've sent delegates to Canada, New Zealand, Australia and America. The first positive result we got was in the United States. One of the biggest shipping companies to use the port of Liverpool is the American ATL line, based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Baltimore and New York. An ATL

ship had been diverted to Norfolk, Virginia, so we went there. Norfolk is a naval base and the security is quite tight. We weren't exactly greeted by the police; they said they had no problem with our picket but would tell us what gate to picket and showed us to a gate round the back that nobody used! After an hour the chief of police came up to them and said "you may have friends up north, but it's a different ball game down south. If you're not off this picket line in half an hour, you'll be locked up." So they had to get out of town!

They went to Baltimore where they had success. The stevedores crossed the picket line but the checkers didn't. They held up an ATL vessel for 12 hours. That cost the company a lot of money.

They went to the ATL terminal in New Jersey, and had a meeting with the American longshoremen's union. They addressed a meeting of their members. It is illegal for workers to collectively decide to cross a picket line. However, they can refuse to cross as individuals. Out of 97 men, not one crossed our picket line.

The American dockers went to the ATL office and said "we want you to get in touch with the Mersey Dock Company and tell them to get this problem sorted out." The ATL gave the Dock Company an ultimatum — if the problem wasn't sorted out by January 22 they would take their ships elsewhere.

The TGWU had been silent up to this point. When they saw us getting a bit of support they decided to get on board. Bill Morris had a meeting with the Dock Company and they came up with an offer. The package was £10,000 each and 100 of us could apply for our jobs back. Those not picked out could go into the casual pool. Plus anyone going to an industrial tribunal had to drop their case. We rejected this offer out of hand.

After talking behind the scenes, the union got another offer. This time it was £25,000 each and 40 jobs back. The jobs were not at the Seaforth Terminal. We had a postal ballot on the offer. We were quite prepared to have a postal ballot because we knew our members would reject the offer. You couldn't have blamed

the men over 55 from walking away with £25,000. But it speaks volumes for the calibre of the men that they didn't do this. The offer was rejected by 271 to 50.

These lads are not fighting for themselves, but are fighting to keep trade union recognition in the port of Liverpool so that we can protect the pay and conditions of the younger lads.

Both John Major and Michael Heseltine have come out in support of the Dock Company. But then the government owns 20% of the company and is bankrolling it.

The silence from the Labour Party has been deafening. Michael Meacher did get off the fence and spoke out for us, but then Tony Blair gagged him. We've heard no more from the Labour Party.

There has been an early day motion in Parliament by Eddie Loyden and Bob Parry and we've had the support of most of the Liverpool Labour MPs except that guy who represents me in Birkenhead, Frank Field. He didn't want to know. We've had support from all the churches of all denominations across the country and from Wirral borough council, Merseyside council and Sefton council.

On 17 February we had an international dockers' conference in Liverpool comprising 34 delegates from 17 countries across the world. The company got frightened by this: they have just spent £10,000 on full page adverts in the *Liverpool Echo* and the *Daily Post*.

Bernard Thripp — the Chief Executive of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company — has been on the local radio several times. He has said that Torside has nothing to do with the MDHC and therefore he couldn't reemploy the sacked Torside men. But then he turns round and says he'd be willing to employ the men brought in by Drake Services at Torside!

This is what it is all about — ending unionised labour in the port of Liverpool. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company thought they could beat us, but they are wrong. They won't beat us.

● Mick Curran was speaking about the Alliance for Workers' Liberty's industrial school on 24 February. ■



1989: Tilbury dockers fighting abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme.