

Fight for free trade unions!

THE Campaign for Free Trade Unions [CFTU] was launched in Liverpool on 19 July. This was an event of immense importance for the future of the trade union movement in Britain.

For the first time, an open, democratic rank and file-based campaign has been set up to fight for the removal of the Tory anti-union legislation and the restoration of an unfettered legal right to strike, take solidarity action and picket effectively. In other words, it is rooted in the idea that now is the right time to begin the fight to restore free, effective trade unionism and to begin to re-assert the basic principles of working class solidarity.

The key idea here is this: the CFTU is to be a broad-based body rooted in the working class struggles that are taking place today.

Every serious trade union struggle in the period ahead will pose the issue of trade union rights.

The conference heard from representatives of all the key disputes taking place at the moment — Liverpool dockers, Hillingdon hospital, Critchley labels, Magnet kitchens, Project Aerospace, London post and British Airways. As well as dele-

gations from these strikes, some 220 people attended from 30 organisations in all, including 16 different unions, 10 trades councils, some local branches of the Socialist Campaign Group Supporters' Network, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, and a few Labour Party wards.

This was unashamedly a rank and file conference. It was not a ceremonial affair studded with labour movement big wigs talking loud but prepared to do little or nothing. It was a gathering of working class fighters with one clear and audacious aim: to build up a campaign that can free our unions.

Nobody at the conference was under the illusion that our task is going to be an easy one. There are many obstacles in our way: the born-again Thatcherites of the New Labour administration who preside over the Tory anti-union laws that have become the Labour government's anti-union laws, and the official leaders of the unions like Morris and Edmonds who refuse to fight or even to plead for their abolition.

Recognising these obstacles, the conference adopted a strategy document that spells out a multi-pronged approach:

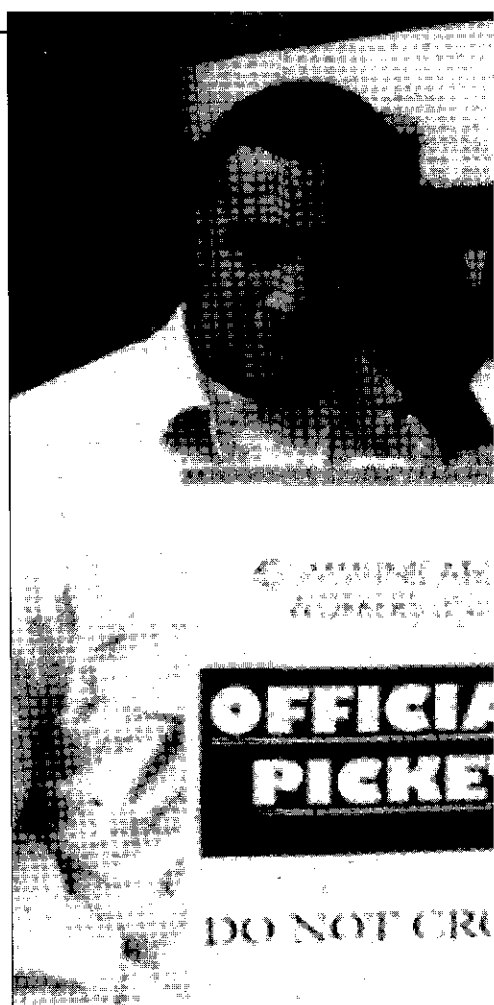
- physical support for workers in

struggle;

- a public campaign to highlight the injustices of the anti-union laws;
- a co-ordinated, cross-union campaign to win majority support at all levels of the union movement for the campaign's goals.

The anti-union laws are certain to become an explosive issue.

We have recently seen British Airways' threat to sack cabin crew for striking, even after a legal postal ballot, expose the anti-union laws for the naked class legislation they are. It helped strengthen public support for the strikers and their union. It has increased support for the



"Everyone's got to make a stand now and make this Labour government change the anti-trade union legislation."

● Doreen McNally, Women on the Waterfront



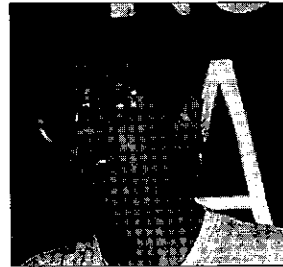
"The right to associate and be recognised is meaningless without the right to strike... level footing with management."

● Sue Hoskins, Critchley Labels



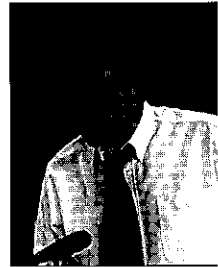
"We are the living symbol of what privatisation means — lost pension, wages and conditions. Our struggle is for the whole working class."

● Malkiat Bilku, Hillingdon



"Where is the solidarity of the trade union leadership? Is it with Thatcher, Murdoch? That's where Tony Blair's solidarity goes to."

● Ian Crammond, Magnet



"We went by the book they locked us out. Why there be restrictions on but none on employers?"

● Hugh Project A

"If the leaders won't fight then th



idea of a legally enshrined right to strike.

New battles are coming on the rail, in the tube and in the post office. Management may try to resort to the anti-union laws in order to block effective action. The issue of the laws will be posed sharply. Blair will back his big business friends, like train operator Richard Branson, using the laws against the rail union, RMT.

The Campaign for Free Trade Unions is a campaign that fits in with the necessary logic of the class struggle. It is not a question of a "bright idea" or a leftist fad or fetish. It is a question of the basic need of the working class for effective action in

its own self-defence.

It is for that reason that we can hope to increase the campaign's support rapidly in the coming months.

We will adopt the old watchword "If the leaders won't lead, then the rank and file must". We will fight to win the major unions to action over the anti-union laws, and over particular, limited questions like the right to recognition and the right to strike. At the same time, we are organising independently of the national union leaderships.

There is no reason why we should not hope to win the affiliation of several of the major national trade unions to the

campaign. As the campaign develops, it will mesh in more and more with the issue of working class representation, which lies at the heart of the conflicts between the unions and New Labour's "modernisers".

Immediately, the CFTU is focussing on:

- work around the TUC Congress to build support for key motions on the anti-union laws;
- the lobby of the Labour Party on Monday 29 September in Brighton in support of free trade unions and the rebuilding of the welfare state. That evening there will be a joint meeting organised by the dockers and the CFTU, where Tony Benn and key strikers will speak.

The CFTU's first national steering committee will be held on Saturday 18 October.

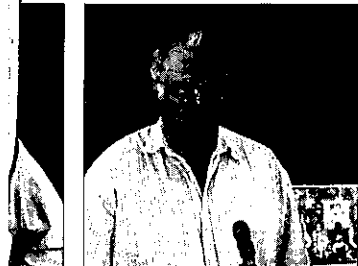
The CFTU will provide a rational framework for tying together the activities of the left across the labour movement.

For that reason, supporters of *Workers' Liberty* will be pressing all other organisations on the left to get properly involved in this initiative. The common basis for collaboration is a commitment to free our class from the shackles of the anti-union laws. Surely all serious socialists and trade union activists can agree to common work towards that goal?

The Liverpool conference passed the following motion, which was moved in the name of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty:

"A vigorous, unapologetic campaign for free trade unions can hope in a relatively short time by way of agitation, education and organisation on this question to rouse and rally large sections of the labour movement around the demand for British trade unions as free as unions are in France or Germany.

"Every serious industrial dispute in the coming period will pose this question sharply. Therefore the first conference for free trade unions calls on the left to unite and build a broad, united, democratically run Campaign for Free Trade Unions."



"Anti-trade union laws are becoming globalised. We need international solidarity everywhere."

● Jimmy Nolan,
Liverpool dockers



"We need to revive the old slogan 'workers of the world unite'. We need a refounding of the labour movement on core principles."

● Mike Hindley MEP



"The sooner we stand together and fight together, the sooner the working class is going to be free."

● Jill Mountford,
Welfare State Network

Affiliate!

£25 (large union organisations);

£10 (small organisations);

£3 (individuals)

Send cheques (payable to "Free Trade Unions Campaign") to IOL Duffy, Liverpool City UNISON, 8 Victoria Street, Liverpool, L2 6QJ.

"rank and file must."