

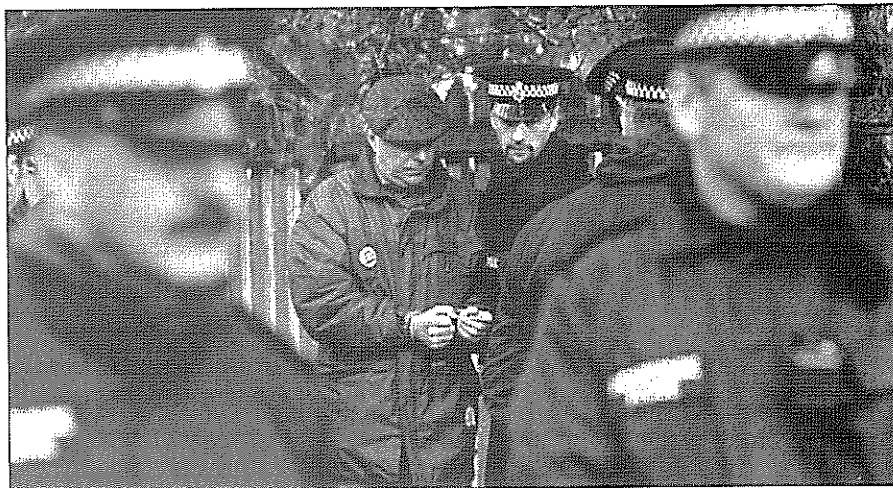
Dockers fight for a future

Thousands rally to support while Blair stays silent.

Mark Catterall reports.

LIVERPOOL on 28 September saw the largest labour movement march in the North-West of England for several years, with some four or five thousand marching in solidarity with the Liverpool dockers who have now been locked out for over a year.

At the front of the march were older trade unionists, many labour movement banners and dockers' families; at the end, large numbers of ravers, anarchists, and radical greens. Even though many of the younger marchers appeared to believe trade unions were irrelevant, their readiness to turn out for the dockers was a very hopeful sign for the future.



Jimmy Davies, the Port Stewards TGWU Secretary, was arrested during the anniversary events. Photo: Dave Sinclair

As we marched through the city, most passers-by were vocal and ready in their support for the dockers. However the boarded-up shops and bankrupt businesses signalled the dire problems facing the local labour movement.

The dockers have probably received more effective support internationally, from dockers in other countries, than from their own union and the local labour movement. For example, the demonstration has been followed by the Australian dockers' union ordering a one-week boycott of Liverpool shipping, but no union in Britain has felt strong enough to organise similar solidarity.

THE dockers, mostly in their forties and fifties, have nowhere to go; Liverpool in decline provides a pool of desperate unemployed who will scab to get a job; so both bosses and workers are set for a long fight.

From 1989 when the government abolished the National Dock Labour Scheme and the port employers defeated the strike, Liverpool had been the only port with unionised

dockers. All the rest have been converted to casual labour. Even in the Mersey ports, a workforce of 1,000 before 1989 had been cut down to 500.

Five years ago 80 dockers' sons were taken on by Torside Ltd on different terms from the other dockers. It was through an attack on that group that the present lockout was engineered.

Torside 'offered' redundancies, saying they wanted to cut the workforce by 20 and employ agency, part-time labour. There was a unanimous strike ballot. The employers backed down, but only until the legal 28-day time limit for the ballot was used up. Then they sacked all 80. The sacked dockers put up a picket line. The other dockers refused to cross, and were all locked out.

Whatever the immediate outcome of this dispute, the dockers' courageous stand has put down a marker for the future.

● Send messages of support and donations to: Merseyside Port Shop Stewards Committee c/o TGWU, Transport House, Islington, LIVERPOOL. Tel: 0151 207 3388. Fax: 0151 298 1044.



Dockers and supporters occupy the roof of the Mersey Docks and Harbours Corporation. Photo: Dave Sinclair