

A fund of support

EARLIER this month, April Lai of the Christian Industrial Committee led about 10 workers in a demonstration in Chun Yip Street, Kwun Tong.

Amid the bustle of industry and beneath smoke-spewing factories, Miss Lai's small group threaded its way through factory workers appealing for support in their fight for a central provident fund.

Their chorus of "Give me the fruits of my labour!" soon attracted a sizeable crowd. One young man jumped up and proceeded to condemn the Government for "protecting rich businessmen by sacrificing workers' interests".

Another, in his 50s, rolled up a sleeve and revealed a severely maimed arm — injured, he said, by factory machinery.

The man told the crowd he had received no compensation: his only reward had immediate dismissal. He was now seeking help from the Labour Tribunal.

"Had there been a central provident fund, I would have been compensated and would not be unemployed," he exclaimed.

A middle-aged woman said she had worked as a cleaner for years but knew that when she retired, there would be no protection, nothing put away for a rainy day.

ARE trade unionists wasting their time pushing for a central provident fund now that the idea has been rejected? TERRY LEE looks at why some unionists have vowed to keep the issue alive.

"I don't want to live on public allowances, it's shameful. I want a central provident fund that will give me something when I retire," she said.

Those supporting a central provident fund cite heart-rending stories such as these as undeniable cause for setting up a fund. While conceding that there is probably more emotion than logic in many of the arguments put forward, they say there is also a single-mindedness to the demands for a centralised fund.

Despite official criticism of labour unionists, whom the authorities accuse of inflaming the emotions of workers, labour support for such a fund is as strong today as it was 10 years ago, when the issue was first raised.

In fact, it has gathered momentum over the past two years as with increasing support: surprisingly, this has come from younger workers, who don't stand to benefit personally for a number of years.

It is precisely this kind of momentum that unionists want to

ment scheme. Indeed, unionists have hailed the long service pay improvement as a welcome move. But they see it as only a step towards their ultimate goal of a provident fund.

While the unionists tend to be the main target of official opposition to the scheme, their most bitter opponents may yet come right from the grassroots level.

Whereas union leaders once led workers in fighting for the fund, the campaign has now gone full circle, with the workers taking up the mantle themselves.

The unionists know very well that they cannot afford to risk losing worker support — their lifeblood, after all — by failing to take up the challenge.

Their biggest fear is that if workers become disillusioned and desert the unions, it will not be easy restoring their confidence in future battles.

Nevertheless, some concede that the fund issue is a lost cause.

Some union leaders have said privately that they are hoping the central provident fund movement will now subside, so they can turn their attention to obtaining improvements in the long service payments scheme.

"How can we back away from giving support when feelings are running so high?" asked one unionist.

He agreed that unionists should be concentrating on the proposed long service pay changes, but said the current labour atmosphere prevented this. The left-wing Federation of Trade Unions believes it has found a way out of this difficult position, however.

The FTU recently set up a top-level internal working group which, among other things, will look into the central provident fund issue.

Its strategy is to try to set aside the fund issue for the time being and focus attention instead on the long service payment scheme — as well as the proposed regulation of privately-funded provident schemes.

The group, headed by FTU chairman Mr Cheng Yiu-tong himself, will have the objective of convincing the union's 170,000 members that sufficient significance is still being attached to the central provident fund issue.

According to Mr Cheng, the group will tell its members that it can afford to bide its time on the controversial issue and treat the fund as a long-term objective.

It is too early yet to see whether this strategy will work, but if the factory workers visited by Miss Lai's group are any indication, not everyone is going to be easily convinced to drop the issue.