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The human face of labour

Frances O'Grady
Dave Elliott
Stephen Marks
Robin Murray
Regan Scott
Tony Simpson
Adrian Smith
Hilary Wainwright
Michael Ward

In April 2016, Frances O'Grady, Trade Union Congress General Secretary, hosted a meeting at Congress House in London to launch the new edition of Mike Cooley's seminal text Architect or Bee? The Human Price of Technology. *In her introduction to the new edition, Frances explains how the book remains a 'must-read' for trade unionists (see* Spokesman 131*). Taking that as our starting point, the discussion about socially useful production ranged widely, as these excerpts indicate.*

Tony Simpson

This is actually a journey which we began in June 2015 when Frances came to Nottingham to give the Ken Coates Memorial Lecture. That was four weeks after the general election, we didn't know what the future held, but we had a very upbeat meeting. As part of her address that day she referred to the Lucas Aerospace experience, and the emphasis on socially useful production.

That was really a starting point for us, because I'd long wanted to publish Mike Cooley's book *Architect or Bee?* I was always intrigued by the title, I never really understood what it meant until I looked and found out. But it had been long unavailable, and it had originally been published from an address in Slough, which was actually Mike's way of doing things. He did it himself.

Mike sent us a message today. He says 'these questions require practical solutions, and I am extremely proud of my Lucas Combine colleagues and their supporters for actions they took over thirty years ago, and for their efforts in spreading the ideas of the Combine.' This is the point: 'Some are even able to be here today and help initiate the second wave of creativity and energy'– we really do need that kind of freedom at a time when things are being imposed on us, such as the contract for junior doctors, who are on strike today, and the imposition of academies, school companies, on 16,000 public sector schools. These things are being imposed on us, but I think our answer in part is that we can offer an outlet or an opportunity for creative responses to that kind of thing. And that's part of our motivation in bringing out *Architect or Bee?*

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Frances O'Grady

For those who have had a chance to look at the book – I kind of wore my heart on my sleeve in the introduction, which was recognising the impact that the Lucas Aerospace Plan had on a number of us of a particular generation; as a source of inspiration for those who believed, like the great Jack Jones, that we needed to take care of the human face of labour. I guess it was all happening at a time when debate around industrial democracy was very real, when we had organisations like the Institute for Workers' Control working with unions in a very close, and real, and practical way to address some of these issues, about how we make more socially useful products and services, but also how we make work more meaningful. I think it's sometimes too easy to forget even today that there are swathes of the workforce involved in what is grindingly boring, repetitive, soul-destroying work, only now perhaps you'd see it in call centres as much as factories. And the other thought I wanted to get across was those ideas never died – clearly there was a blossoming of activity and thinking and practical action in the seventies, but I don't think those ideas ever disappeared. In the lead up to the general election, the TUC – I think to the surprise of some – was arguing the case for workers on remuneration committees in companies: not because we thought that would change the world, although the idea of the boss having to look a representative of his workforce in the eye and explain why he should be getting so much more money than they were was appealing, but it was a way of putting a foot in the door, and in many ways, in popular terms, talking about workers on boards is something people get. Actually, interestingly, in all the polling we did the public massively supported, and what's more saw as common sense, even if not everybody in boardrooms and sometimes political chambers saw it the same way, but it was a way of opening up a discussion about why is it that the British workplace deems workers' ideas, ingenuity, expertise, imagination to be so second-rate that it's not worth employing at every level of strategic thinking and decision-making of a company.

In smaller ways, too, I think a lot of that spirit was kept alive through the TUC's green workplaces projects – again, we wouldn't pretend this was changing the world, but we were trying to set up models through collective agreements and active environmental union reps to show how workers' thinking could actually save companies a lot of money, what we could do with that green dividend in terms of improving paid conditions but also the working lives of people, as well as cutting carbon.

And you can still see it in something like the privatisation of Royal Mail, what the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) was able to get in that agreement, as well as a whole range of protections for the members,

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was what they called a 'Futures Forum', where the union would be sitting down with top management and talking about the direction of the company, what products and services it should be producing.

I'm a bit caught up in work on steel at the moment, what's happening not just in Port Talbot but the steel industry, the impact on manufacturing more broadly. The union negotiators at Tata, a company where we've traditionally had good relationships, longstanding constructive relationships, those officers who negotiated the recognition agreement had the foresight to include a clause wherein the company, in the event of any threatened closure, pay for us to commission our own independent specialist advice and support on developing an alternative plan, which is what we're doing. Again, it's been mentioned in the press a little bit, it's work in progress, who knows where we're going to end up here? But nevertheless, it shows that spirit is still there in a very real and practical way, in the trade union movement.

This agenda is even more urgent in a world where we know there are profound and unsustainable levels of inequality. One employer said to me recently, off the record, he knew he was sitting on top of a volcano; where financialisation has a grip of our economy, and that has profound consequences for those companies and workforces in the real economy who are actually making things or doing things that may be of variable value, but nevertheless compared to some of the goings on in Panama or the City of London, I think we can draw conclusions there. There is hollowing out the workforce, where we still have, as Mike Cooley pointed out, that enormous expertise within our own ranks, many of our unions have it in that membership, in those union reps, and we don't deploy it enough. But we've also got masses of people now deployed in low-paid, low-skilled, insecure work, often massively overqualified for the work that they're doing. It's a big challenge to me in thinking about this agenda how we use not only our engineers, scientists, climate change specialists, all those experts and skilled workers we've got – professional workers, too – that we've got in the trade union movement and beyond, but what about everybody else really on the sharp end of an increasingly unequal economy and society? I think there is massive talent and potential there that's been untapped, and it would be lovely to unleash.

Tony Simpson

Cutting carbon is certainly part of the story, and one of the issues I'd like to explore further is the initiative for *A Million Climate Change Jobs*. It has been suggested that if you join *Architect or Bee?* with *A Million Climate*

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Change Jobs then that's a current agenda. But perhaps Robin Murray would tell us about the Greater London Council experience and where that fits?

Robin Murray
In the 1980s, the GLC set up a small unit, the Economic Policy Group. It had five people. It was about prototyping, to show that radical economic ideas could be made real. Mike Cooley was one of the five. He had been an inspiration to all of us in the seventies. We all knew about Lucas Aerospace. It had become a beacon of hope, concerned not just with the distribution of the economic pie, but with what kind of pie it was, and how it was produced.

The senior GLC administrators were not so keen on the presence of this group. They had delayed our appointment for nine months, then put us in a tiny little room between two senior minders. This was the physical context of our initial months. On day one we divided up the tasks. Mike said he would take technology. Hilary Wainwright had written books about Lucas Aerospace and Vickers, and took on the task of setting up a popular planning unit. There was work on strategy, and training, and establishing a development bank.

Looking back, you could see that the tenor of the GLC's economic work was, in a way, informed by what the shop stewards had done at Lucas Aerospace. It was about socially useful production, it was about looking at technology as human-centred, and not deskilling, about not dividing head and hand, but building on people's ideas and skills. Above all, economic policy should promote the production of what is needed by people, and not just what the market dictated.

When the unit got going – it was the time when Margaret Thatcher's policy was really hitting manufacturing – London factories started coming to us saying they were about to go down. I think in each case – Mike will remember this – it was clear that they had to have a restructuring plan, like steel now. Mike and Hilary would go in and follow the Lucas Aerospace Plan model. For example, London's furniture industry was in crisis. Hilary ran a series of ten seminars with the trade unions about thinking strategically and what could be done.

As soon as the GLC's new bank, the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB) got going, Mike went down there, along with other policy people, so that they were close to what was going on. What Mike did at GLEB was to establish half a dozen Lucas style technology networks. One was behind the GLEB office, another one was down at the then Thames Polytechnic.

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A third was at the North East London Polytechnic. They opened their doors and said 'if you've got ideas, and we've got all these skills in London being discarded, come and start a new initiative and have a go!' And they did.

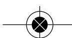
All sorts of things came out of that. There was an electric bike: at the time the law had been changed, and opened the way for electric bikes. This electric bike was prototyped, and we then found that all the bicycle makers in Britain had been wiped out, so Mike tracked down a factory in Italy to get them made. Then there was a single blade windmill. One whole network was about energy efficiency at home, a pioneering service that had a long lasting impact, whose creators I came across supporting a range of energy efficiency projects twenty years later.

Down at Thames College the network created an expert medical system and a kidney dialysis machine that could be carried on your back like a rucksack, so you wouldn't need to go into hospital and be immobilised for a day.

I think the most difficult factory we ever had to deal with was an old GEC plant that had made 'Press Button B' phones. The only places they could still sell them were in Malaysia and Ireland. Arnold Weinstock, who was head of GEC at the time, wanted to close it. The workers resisted, and the GLC helped them take it over. Mike went in there, and what did he do? He said 'Right, let's get going!' and developed the alternative to 'Press Button B'. Unfortunately, the new company's finances ran out and the plant had to close. But the new plan survived and was successfully developed in Sweden. Even though, in this case, no jobs remained in London, public money was saved because, during the worker owned company's period of operation, the GLC's financial support was only a third of the unemployment pay it would have cost if everyone had been sacked.

Prototyping is in part about getting your errors in early, which allows for small-scale failures as a means for strengthening the chances of long-term success. There were many successes in which Mike was a central figure. He is a wonderful public speaker and, when explaining to audiences, workforces, and to those great meetings that were held in festivals of jobs at the time, people would intuitively grasp this approach to the economy – because it was concrete.

On re-reading Mike's book, two things strike me. One is that we now live in a markedly different economy than in the 1970s both in terms of industrial structure, and the culture and strength of organised labour. Today's younger generation in the age of Google find it hard to imagine



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what it was like when there were still nearly one million manufacturing jobs in London alone. But a lot of what Mike was talking about has many resonances for this new generation from designers and coders, to instrument makers and care workers. They have a belief in human-centred innovation and that you shouldn't have a division between mental and manual labour.

There is a similar resonance in the growing social innovation movement which says 'let's take the problem, get those who are affected by the problem (those with chronic disease, for example, or homelessness) together with coders, and work out a solution.' Visionary, pragmatic, values driven. So the spirit of the Lucas approach is very much of the moment.

The other big change is that it's not just labour involved in creating alternative plans. It is civil society more generally. In part this is because consumers have been drawn into the production process. The era of Lego has people deciding on the make up of their own kit, whether it be PCs, bikes, even houses. With chronic disease it is patients and their friends and family who are key, and the same goes for social care, or education, or transport. We are all 'producers' now, and are unwilling to be the deskilled consumers of high Fordism and its systems. Users have become advocates of human-centred design.

This has coalesced in the last 30 years into consumer movements that have increasingly demanded changes in the products and processes of the factory age. In many cases they have developed alternative systems of their own (think of food, or waste, or energy, or transport). *Architect or Bee?* directly speaks to users and these new movements, and to the user-centred designers who are transforming traditional public services by developing services with users and front-line service workers.

Mike's work and ideas, as set out in *Architect or Bee?,* are both of their time and beyond it. They will be seen as part of that long visionary tradition that includes William Morris, Gandhi and Ivan Illich. Like them, he shows from the raw material of his experience, the shape and character of an alternative and readily realisable humanist economy.

Tony Simpson

I don't want to write off manufacturing industry. There is scope – we have a proposal for a defence diversification agency, for example – and there are lots of people still working in those areas. In the East Midlands we have Rolls-Royce at Derby, and it's been impacting on local politics because of the Trident discussion. It's where they produce the nuclear reactors for the

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submarines. The Lucas Aerospace experience was partly to do with the failure of Rolls-Royce first time round, when it had to be rescued by the Heath Government in 1971. Lucas Aerospace as a major supplier to Rolls-Royce felt some of the impact of the crisis in that company, which was to do with the RB211 aero engine. Rolls-Royce was rescued, and it thrived, and it stayed in the public sector until 1987, when Mrs Thatcher privatised it. What lessons are there from the Lucas Aerospace experience in terms of defence diversification? This is actually a very relevant part of the current political discussion.

Michael Ward

It's very nice to be meeting in Congress House, and very ironic because I remember from the campaign against GLC abolition, the word came back from a TUC committee that had been discussing the campaign against abolition. A very eminent, Broad Left member of the General Council spoke up and said he wasn't going to support any organisation that would give Cooley a job.

I think the great importance of Lucas, and its importance now, is not really in the detail; it's about hope and inspiration, innovation and creativity. When you look at industrial policies on the Left, whether they come out of the Labour Party or the TUC or anywhere else, it's amazing how quickly people come, and the default setting of industrial policy is always 'we're going to create balance; we're going to create lending institutions; we're going to create financial institutions'; and this is what we wrote about. We wrote about it with Stuart Holland before 1981, we wrote about it when we created the Greater London Enterprise Board, and we endowed the Enterprise Board with a great deal of capital, and actually it wasn't very difficult to charm capital out of the GLC bureaucracy. The problem when you create those institutions, when you've got the money: are you going to lend it on the same terms as the market, in which case, what's the point? Or are you going to lend it on different terms, in which case, how do you justify it, how do you do it?

That's the problem Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell are going to face now. It's the problem every Labour government faces. My dad spent most of his life working for the Department of Trade and Industry in one role or another, during a long working career, and I explained to him, before 1981, what we were going to try and do in London, and he sat and he listened, and he said 'You will have every rogue in London round your door'. And actually we did! We also had a lot of very honest and serious people, who went through the appraisal procedures.

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The creation of lending institutions, especially with the infrastructure, how they are now, the bureaucracy of creating a lending institution to lend money on interest rates – it's barely worth doing. What you need is the money to fund innovation; what you need is revenue money, not capital money. You need the money to pump into grant aid, innovation. You don't need all this money that goes through careful tests of viability and feasibility studies; you need the money to back the hunches, to fund the creative thoughts.

Stephen Marks

I worked at Greater London Enterprise Board with Mike Cooley, on the technology networks. We were able to take for granted at that time polytechnics, which were in the local government sector, and Mike Cooley said 'here they are: academic institutions – they have research laboratories, they have workshops, and for half the year, during the university vacations, they're empty, they're not being used. They're community resources; let's throw them open to the public and say anybody in the community with an idea they think might be a socially useful product can come in.' We don't have that infrastructure anymore.

The other thing that we were doing concerned the assessment process that the Greater London Enterprise Board went through. It wasn't a conventional assessment process because Robin devised a series of tests to evaluate possible investments which factored in contribution to industrial democracy, industrial relations, contribution to the environment, social usefulness of the product, and you would get added points for that. But we also went beyond conventional financial assessment criteria in a way that I think is relevant today, and has surfaced in the arguments over Tata Steel, which is to look at the costs of unemployment. There were many projects which 'failed', but were actually providing useful employment for people at less than the cost of keeping them on the dole, especially when you factor in the social cost, the household disruption. Mike Cooley was very good at making this point, about the social cost of insecurity and unemployment.

It's true that the market will sniff out anything that can make a profit, but it does have certain disinclinations at certain stages in investment. There was a product, a largely self-recharging freight loader for airfreight: it's a very simple idea. You have a freight loader which goes up and loads the freight onto an aircraft; when it unloads, why not turn the engine off, let gravity do the work and recharge the battery? Extremely simple idea, amazing nobody thought of it before. We funded production of a few

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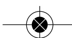
prototypes that could be sent around to get airports and airlines interested, but we couldn't get the finance to actually go into the first stage of production. I gather this is called *mezzanine* funding, between the ground floor and the first floor. And so the firm went bust, it was bought out of bankruptcy by a German firm, and the lifter was originally made in West London. But one of the problems of a public sector venture capital outfit, which is what we were, is that we were quite properly accountable, and I as a civil servant had to write the quarterly reports to the full GLC, phrasing them so that things that weren't so optimistic couldn't be seized on by the Tory opposition. Of course, they said 'this money's been wasted! You put this money into this firm and it went bankrupt and it's been written off!' We pointed out, first of all, that the firm was still producing – it may now be producing in Germany, I don't know, but it's still environmentally useful. We also pointed out that, in Germany, the money we put in as investment they could have got as a grant from the government, for innovation. So we were making a point there, just as we were also making a point about the costs of unemployment.

Hilary Wainwright

There was implicit in the Lucas experience and then in the GLC a completely different way of doing politics, of relating to the State. The Lucas initiative was stimulated by a relationship with Tony Benn, who had a completely different understanding of the role of a minister for industry, so instead of relying on management he recognised Frances' point: the knowledge and capacity of the workers. So when there was a question of 'should the aerospace industry be nationalised, and if so, for what purpose?' he didn't go and talk to management or to the officials, he worked with the Institute for Workers' Control, and that's another thing we must learn. That institution was crucial. The role that Ken Coates played in bringing together shop stewards across the whole of manufacturing, including arms-producing companies like Vickers. When Tony Benn faced that problem, he went to the shop stewards, with the help of Ken Coates; he brought them all together, from Burnley, from Willesden, from Neasden, from Birmingham, they all came into his office, and the officials were completely gobsmacked. 'The officials' meaning the civil servants, but actually some of the trade union officials couldn't believe that a minister would go direct to the shop stewards, rather than via the circuitous institutions of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU). The problem the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards got Dave Elliott and me to work on was why couldn't the trade union movement actually



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respond to their initiative? What was wrong with the structure of the trade unions, particularly the Confederation, that made them incapable of giving real support and generalising? So Mike Cooley, if he was here, would be really pleased to hear Frances' contribution, which seems to have learnt those lessons, and without our research come to a really positive conclusion. But the point was that Tony Benn was in a way slightly overcoming the anarchist 'State versus popular power', saying we need popular power, we need popular knowledge if we're to implement a radical industrial strategy. And in the end Benn was sacked for daring to do that kind of thing – daring to support the workers.

Mike Cooley then took up the gauntlet, and that's exactly what the GLC was about: unlocking the capacities of the State, recognising those powers and those resources were crucial. So it wasn't an anarchist position, it was 'we need to share those powers, share those resources, but with those that have the knowledge and the capacity and the power to implement'. In a way, the GLC had to be modest because it didn't have much actual power, but it did have resources and it did have legitimacy, so in a sense it was impelled to find allies within society, within production, and it went to the workers within production, just as Tony Benn had done, and the stewards responded.

This is a wholly different model of understanding the role of the State in industrial policy – and I think Jeremy Corbyn understands it. How he mobilises the Labour Party and the Trade Union movement to implement that new understanding of industrial strategy implies also a different understanding of the role of the unions, because of this point about knowledge, which is the other key thing that Mike Cooley stressed. He used to talk about 'those things you know but cannot tell', quoting Michael Polanyi. For Hayek, that was the knowledge of the entrepreneur, hence the justification of the market. For Mike Cooley and for social movements, that tacit knowledge – 'those things we know but cannot tell' – was the basis of forms of organisation such as combine committees; decentralised, sharing, networks of organisation that could share practical knowledge. So it wasn't from above. It was sharing, which we also learned in the women's movement, which led to a completely different understanding of planning, as being not predictive, not certain. You could never predict the outcome. There was a connection between intention and outcome, unlike the Hayek free market model, but it was always uncertain, always experimental.

What are the agencies for socialising that knowledge? One experience that took up the Lucas Aerospace idea in contemporary context where I could observe this process of sharing knowledge was in the public sector,

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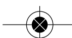
the struggle against privatisation, where the workers were in an industrial area in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. They knew the experience of Lucas, the experience of Vickers, and they said 'hang on a minute – we need a workers' plan as our alternative to privatisation!' And then they recognised we, the public sector workers – it was the information technology and related services at Newcastle Council – have the knowledge, and in a way the union acted as a means of socialising and sharing that knowledge. If we could work with the TUC to develop that. It's built into the steel example you gave, where there's a recognition that the unions, at the base, grassroots level, potentially have capacity to share that knowledge. This is what the IWC, in a way, recognised.

This brings me onto defence conversion. Here's a really classic example of both the knowledge example and the politics in terms of what we need, what's lacking. Because workers in Barrow – I went there when I was working with the Vickers shop stewards in the mid-70s – *had* alternatives. They'd really worked on alternatives – these were the Mike Cooleys of Barrow – particularly around wind power, all the things which now are obvious. They were in TASS, which is now UNITE, and they were working away on very precise prototypes. They knew in practice how their skills could be used to develop wind power and various energy and climate-related products. So, the knowledge is there, and Kate Hudson can describe how, when CND did work, there's a huge, rich source of knowledge on the basis of alternatives. The politicians have been way behind on all that, other than one or two, such as Albert Booth, who was the MP in Barrow. The capacity's there, and workers are demoralised because there's been no take-up of that alternative, so there's a feeling of 'it's Trident or nothing' – the whole idea of conversion is not in the common sense of the unions. We've got to work together to bring that back. Jeremy has made an initiative with this national defence diversification agency.

Finally, on knowledge, I think it does mean we've got to think about how the unions, how adult education and trade union education can be developed in that direction, not just to train trade unions for bargaining of a defensive kind, but how to, in a Paulo Freire way, bring out the tacit knowledge and skill that's in workers' daily lives. We tried to do that in the GLC with an alliance between adult education and trade unions, and maybe that model could be developed.

Dave Elliott

As I moved into energy policy, you heard ministers and civil servants say things; you knew they were wrong, and you knew you had a different view.



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On the other hand, academics and experts also get things wrong. Where are we going to find the truth?

The experience of Lucas reminded me that maybe not all truth relies on the workers' experiences of day-to-day activities in plants, but there are quite a lot of things you should listen to. There is an interactive dialectic if you like between experts and grassroots. I think that's what I've tried to do over the years, every situation I've found myself in, dealing with energy policy issues, it's always been the case that you needed to take a different view from the establishment, but always you also take on other views as well.

Whether you can do that sort of pluralism in a complicated ongoing situation I don't know. We heard earlier that you could spend a lifetime trying to fight the civil service; you have to have a separate power base. Having a separate power base has always been a problem. Lucas and the trade union movement had sort of a separate power base, the GLC, and the sense that we actually had an area of operation. We're still stuck with having to accept what we're told to do – we fight it, but we can't fight it very well. The separate power base still isn't there.

I don't think we've really understood the power of institutions. When I was in this building years ago, Len Murray was the general secretary at the time, and I met him in the lift. We were talking about politics and radical ideas, and he said 'it's very nice to hear all these things, but this lift, you see, it'll be here in 50 years' time. I won't – nor will the general council, and nor will you. The building will, the movement will be, and I must never risk that.' That worried me, that level of conservativeness; that the building and the movement were more important than the decisions of the day. But I can understand that; it is important to think about institutions. Whether they ossify is another problem. We probably need some new institutions. We're still here, we're still using this one.

David King

The forthcoming conference on 'Climate Jobs not Bombs' [Birmingham, 26 November 2016] will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Lucas Plan. We're going to talk about 'one million climate change jobs' issues, and also about alternative local community planning, as well as robotics and automation. We see reports that [automation is] going to eliminate 30-40% of the labour market, and I think the trade union movement has to seriously take on the idea that it's either got to use its power and intervene in that, or it's going to lose its power altogether.

Regarding Lucas, Steve Sprung has made a new film, based on

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interviews with members of the Combine Committee, which is hopefully going to be finished this year. They're setting up a website as an archive of the Lucas Plan documentation, which will be really helpful. We have been talking with Dave and Hilary about the possibility of reprinting their book, *The Lucas Plan: A new trade unionism in the making?*

I'm trying to write something about the broader context of what happened at Lucas and the GLC in the struggles of trade unionists against the way in which management's always used the introduction of new technology as a tool to restructure the labour process, thereby deskilling and controlling workers. One thing that happened at Lucas that doesn't get talked about a lot, but is mentioned in Dave and Hilary's book, is that, for a year or so, they managed to negotiate a one-year moratorium on the introduction of new technology, which I think was very interesting. It has started to happen a lot in other European countries — Sweden very much, but also Germany, Italy, a variety of places and, interestingly, in the USA. The idea of industrial democracy included the idea of democratic control of technology, so I'm writing something and I want to put the Lucas Plan in that broader context. I'm not aware of much else apart from Lucas and the other alternate workers' plans that looked at producing socially useful products. Does anybody know about other things that were going on in that period which were about getting democratic control of technology?

Adrian Smith

There was a book called *Very Nice Work If You Can Get It* (Spokesman, 1985). I think I was learning to skateboard then, or between the Lucas Plan and the technology networks and the GLC. But friends' parents worked at Lucas – I grew up in Birmingham. I'm a researcher at Sussex University, and I do a lot of research on grassroots innovation and social movements around technology, and a few years ago I had the chance to look at the Lucas Plan. So I went into various archives, spoke with Mike, Robin, Dave, and then wrote a little bit about that. Interestingly, it got picked up by some of the movements or networks today, and what I'd like to chip in is that there are workshops now – hackerspaces, fab labs [fabrication laboratories], makerspaces, libraries are opening little workshops to prototype things – and the interesting thing now, of course, is that they're increasingly networked as well, and designs can be shared freely online, instructions, videos. There's this combination of the new technologies allowing that free flow of knowledge and recognition, but then having been rooted in neighbourhoods or in libraries where they're tacit, which is always important, and that's the grit around which technology and

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automation has to work, and is a site of resistance and alternatives.

I've been following and engaged in those sorts of areas as a researcher and people within that have been really fascinated about the Lucas experience and the technology networks, and there's a resonance there, because there's a search for how to do the socialising, how to build the power base for creating these alternatives, because it's so easy for this activity to be appropriated, or swept into a very individualised, entrepreneurial, Silicon Valley myth. We have to remember Silicon Valley was funded through public money and military money. There was a strong state role in its creation that the entrepreneurs now like to forget.

Trade unions are less present in the maker movements today. Trade unions are largely absent – these people are working precariously, or it's their hobby, or voluntarily – so I wonder where the connection can be made, if you like, between organisations and institutions that have a long history and skill at working co-operatively and building power bases, and this ingenuity and creativity that's out there, in every town and city. That's the challenge; learning and thinking with history, working with those organisations that still have some power in society. Of course, this is easier said than done. Building solidarity with people whose worlds today are very different, even if the aspirations are familiar and longstanding, might require new ways of thinking about organisation and mobilisation.

Regan Scott

I wanted to explain about the Transport and General booklet *A Better Future for Defence Workers,* which I commissioned in 1983-4, in response to the serious prospect of conventional and nuclear disarmament. The T&G policy proposal — for union and Labour Party consumption — relied on the basic principle of alternative production which the Lucas Plan had launched. It was expressed as *A Better Future for Defence Jobs*, but the meat in the sandwich was essentially alternative production for social needs and markets.

Thinking about disarmament and jobs had got quite advanced, with the notion that defence contracts should be seen as planning agreements with alternatives built into them, with a funded government agency to oversee defence conversion. The Institute for Workers Control and the European Nuclear Disarmament movement were important drivers in this policy area, and the T&G's Ron Todd was a particularly supportive leader.

It was not all utopian, though. Some defence sector 'alternatives' weren't — or didn't always sound — very practical. On the other hand, a small and successful example concerned the Italian tank manufacturer who

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generated a tank-sighting mechanism for night operations, which was subsequently adopted for monitoring pollution, and was used during the Seveso chemical disaster. A giant mushroom farm project for Gwent's huge munitions stores looked a runner, but was deprived of commercial trial by a change of heart at the Ministry of Defence. I got involved in the closure of the second Westland Helicopter site in north Somerset, visiting with a colleague from Ruskin College about union involvement in converting the site. The T&G initiated a defence conversion debate in the European Parliament, and some funding came to Britain, though sadly it went because of politics outside union spheres.

The Union had also acquired non-military alternative production experience across its many industrial sectors. When leaded petrol was banned, there was a closure issue at Associated Octel in Cheshire. We commissioned quite an extensive alternatives study, but Octel bought time, and then carried on producing but sending the lead to the Third World, as we called it then. T&G members at Ferodo in Chapel-en-le-Frith pushed to get asbestos out of brake linings, an achievement with huge health and safety gains.

The defence conversion 'alternative production' story was driven by the first breakthroughs in both nuclear and conventional disarmament — the Soviet Union faced the problem of what they were going to do with all the tank factories and so on. They had, at the very least, a national planning system and did a lot of preparatory work. In the West, it was different. We had to deal with political attitudes, so to some extent the *Better Future for Defence Jobs* booklet was about converting a defence worker psychology of dependency on war politics, to foster a different understanding that these jobs were unnecessarily insecure. They might be pretty well paid and well unionised. My family were Midlands engineering workers employed in the aircraft industry, and their lifestyle, while prosperous, always had a distinct edge of insecurity coming from the uncertainty of defence and associated national policy making. Surely things could be better than that.

Alternative production has another key dimension, as a reflection of the fundamental impulse to workers' control, which is always somewhere, however dormant, in the consciousness of organised workers. The industrial co-ops movement to overcome closures, and the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders occupation come to mind. They didn't involve alternatives, but they demonstrated the principle of industry run for society and employment.

The positives of a multi-track story need balancing, however, by the recognition that in everyday trade union operations, it is not natural or

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legitimate to bargain routinely about the products of work, outside situations of closure and redundancy and restructuring. Engineering unions dominant in the UK defence industries have not traditionally been interested in anything much else than wages and conditions, and it looks as though the T&G's peace and alternatives tradition has not survived into the UNITE merger. That is a matter of reality, but I think the basic arguments should be re-floated, although that's a job for a new generation. Set against this conservatism about union scope is the modern fact (the past 40 years, maybe?) that industrial employment has been profoundly unstable and uncertain. So, despite routine bargaining and pursuing alternatives appearing to be separate and distinct, these two dimensions of worker experience and union work should, in my view, be seen as profoundly interdependent.

And we should recognise that some efforts have been made to bring them together, albeit at a formal level of policy making. The European social dimension played a key part here. When I was doing European work in the 1990s, with colleagues across Europe, we tried to extend and repackage the menu of European job security rights to develop the notion that there should be a core right for workers to have a decisive role in industrial restructuring. This would consist in retaining the 'status quo' of terms and conditions and employment levels, with access to resources for expert help and reasonable time for unions to develop alternative plans for the enterprise. European works councils would have been the natural conduit for such rights. It was advanced thinking, and it might have happened, but European politics turned away from the Left and the social dimension. However, the story shows how the Lucas Plan concept came close to being an integrated and routine part of union work and industrial relations, not just a special case of important utopian thinking or a child of its times.

Ian Hewitt

Socialising tacit knowledge – is that what the commons movement is about? And about building structures that form new societies around that thing called 'the common'. We've got to be careful about the defence diversification agency, because isn't that a replay from the nineties? You've got to be every careful about 'spin out' and 'spin in'. 'Spin in' takes the social product and puts that into the military-industrial complex – and there's a lot of that been going on. So, be very careful about 'spin in'!

My contribution to CAITS [Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems] was right at the end, when we managed to close it

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down. I did get involved in a debate with the engineering institutions, all of them, and the debate was 'international conflict is essential for technological development'. That was a serious debate: we spoke against it, and we won, but there were about 400 graduate engineers there from all the blue chip companies, and BAE were there, pushing their particular line. But that's the context that has followed, that's the world we're living in now, so the technical education is about programming people, it's about educating people basically not to think about what they're doing. So there's a very important challenge, but also getting hold of this idea of the commons, because that seems to be a space that invites all sorts of possibility.

Frances O'Grady
To introduce a note of real realism, in some very current debates, talking to some conveners about alternatives, the reaction from one was that 'the road of history is littered with failed alternative plans, thank you very much'; they're worried about jobs, paying the bills, communities – I think everybody here knows that. But in a funny kind of way I think what's happening on steel also shows how quickly things can change; a politician who is an über-free marketeer having to get his jaws around phrases like 'industrial strategy', 'the strategic importance of steel', 'the hard workers of Port Talbot' and so on gives you an indication of how things can change quickly. But also in terms of our thinking, some of the tactical thinking that we need to do about trying to pick where you think you've got a chance of winning a few battles, so that you create those prototypes, whether that's about technology or about models of the way things can change. I would love to talk more.

I was today at the Camden Collective, about the combination of technology and comms. There is a genuinely global workforce being created, with young creatives coming up with ideas – often being ripped off something terrible – and the challenge that poses is something actually that we're looking to work on. In the context of the digital economy, what does all this mean? Where are the pressure points? Who are the agents? Who are the allies? And how do you create the political terrain that makes some of this more possible?