

## Trade unions and socially useful production

*Tom Unterrainer*

*Tom Unterrainer is an activist in the National Union of Teachers, editor of Corbyn's Campaign (Spokesman 2015), and co-editor with Louise Regan of Standing up for Education (Spokesman 2016).*

Amongst the nominations for the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize was to be found an organisation named 'The Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee'. The Committee was nominated for its work on converting military production into peaceful uses. They ultimately lost out to Mother Teresa, who won the prize for her work in 'bringing help to suffering humanity'.

Mother Teresa has since become something of a controversial figure in the light of allegations made by Aroup Chatterjee and others. The Combine Committee and the sustained attempts it made from 1974 onwards to save 14,000 jobs at Lucas Aerospace suffered from more than a little bit of controversy itself. The consequences of this controversy were not only the wilful destruction of thousands of jobs but also the burial of hopes for the implementation of a scheme for socially useful production. It did not have to be this way

The Combine Committee was established in 1972 'to co-ordinate the fight for better wages, conditions and job security'<sup>1</sup> across Lucas' many manufacturing sites. It won a number of important victories for Lucas workers and set up a research group to consider the impact of new technology on jobs and conditions. However, the Lucas workforce was soon faced with the prospect of large-scale redundancies. The Combine Committee instigated a wide-ranging discussion amongst the workforce, informed by an understanding that something more than a call for nationalisation was required.

In November 1974, representatives of the Combine Committee met with then Industry Minister Tony Benn to discuss their concerns for the future of Lucas

Aerospace. Benn was impressed with the delegation, ‘how well organised they were and by the homework they had done on the state of their firm and the industry’.<sup>2</sup> He suggested that a process be instigated by which the Combine, the firm and government formulate a plan for saving jobs and the industry at large. Being more sensitive than Benn at the time to the risks posed by ‘corporatism’<sup>3</sup> of this kind, the Combine instead embarked upon formulating their own plan – ‘The Lucas Plan’.

It’s worth stepping back at this point to consider the startling nature of Benn’s response. Here was a minister of state in a government already planning cut-backs in military procurement and considering the nationalisation of sections of the aerospace industry – excluding Lucas – who was prepared to positively respond to representations from a group of workers. That this group of workers was self-organised and outside of officially recognised trade union structures only adds to the importance of what Benn proposed. Not only that, when these workers informed Benn that they would take up only part of his offer, he was prepared to continue listening to them

These facts alone mark out both Benn’s tenure as Minister for Industry and the Combine Committee’s activities for special attention. But more than this already impressive constellation of events happened. The Combine Committee went about formulating a plan based upon the technical skills and knowledge of workers themselves; they formulated a plan that took into consideration the conditions of work of those designing, producing and manufacturing the products but they also considered the social impact of the products being produced.

On 12 February 1979, Bob Cryer MP said in the House of Commons:

*‘I am grateful for the opportunity to raise what is one of the most important moral crusades that this country has seen in the twentieth century. I refer to the Lucas Aerospace combine shop stewards’ committee, its corporate plan and the work it has done over the past three years. The shop stewards’ imaginative method of tackling the question of providing jobs for peace and not for destruction is an important moral crusade of which the House and the nation must take note ... One of the difficulties faced by the ... shop stewards is that, by and large, people do not wish this sort of question to be raised. They prefer to go for soft, easy contracts to sell 500 tanks to a reactionary regime in some distant land...’<sup>4</sup>*

As Bob Cryer pointed out, the Combine Committee focused not only on the moral imperative to save jobs but also the moral imperative to build a peaceful and useful future for humanity. The Lucas Plan challenged not only management’s ‘right to manage’ but also insisted upon the

establishment of a new industrial and political settlement

Writing ten years after the publication of the Lucas Plan, Mike Cooley – a central figure in the Combine Committee – said:

*‘Lucas workers themselves never believed that it would be possible to establish in Lucas Aerospace alone the right to produce socially useful products ... What the Lucas workers did was to embark on an exemplary project which would enflame the imagination of others. To do so, they realised that it was necessary to demonstrate in a very practical and direct way the creative power of “ordinary people”.’*<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps one of the factors restraining the Lucas workers’ belief in this possibility were the numerous political barriers put in the way of an honest and open debate about the Plan<sup>6</sup> – Benn’s removal from the Department of Industry being one of them. What we do know is that of the one hundred and fifty products outlined in the Lucas Plan, many of them have since gone into production, including hybrid cars which are now being sold in their millions.

What are the lessons of this story for those of us keen to apply the concept of socially useful production to the questions around jobs and community sustainability posed by opposition to Trident replacement? That there are barriers to such an approach is beyond doubt and the fact that these barriers extend beyond those erected by hawkish think-tanks and government departments into sections of the trade union movement should give some urgency to our discussions on this matter. However, the primary lesson is that had the Lucas Plan gone into operation, it might very well be the case that several British industries would not only have survived but would have done so in a way that put human, environmental and societal needs front-and-centre.

\* \* \*

In 1987, the Transport and General Workers Union – now part of Unite the Union – hosted an ‘Arms Jobs Conversion Conference’. The conference heard from trade unionists, Labour politicians, academics and peace campaigners. Those present discussed the arms conversion work under way in Sweden; the ideas of Seymour Melman – author of *The Demilitarized Society* – and discussed detailed plans for alternative industrial strategies in the arms industry. The conference report includes papers from Stuart Holland MP, Ken Coates from the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, Dr Herbert Wulf of the Hamburg Peace Institute, along with Ron Todd and Bill Morris from the TGWU. Ron Todd’s paper is an

impassioned call for a saner and more democratic approach to investment and the defence of jobs. He concludes:

‘Surely the time is ripe for different voices to be raised for a saner and securer world for defence workers, for working people at large and the desperate millions of the Third World? The situation is a challenge to us all and I for one am confident that we can help to meet it.’

Importantly, the papers presented by Stuart Holland and Ken Coates addressed the ways in which arms conversion strategies can not only preserve jobs but also create more, better and more socially useful jobs. As Stuart Holland also points out:

‘We *need* to be able to give the guarantee of alternative jobs, and we have to be *able* to guarantee alternative jobs. If we cannot guarantee those jobs as a process of planned conversion of enterprises we do not deserve the support of the workers in those enterprises. We really cannot say to them, we will end nuclear production, or we will run down the arms industry, and you go down the road.’

Ken Coates identifies some of the factors that needed – and still need – to be considered when conceptualising the arms conversion agenda. Key amongst these is that state spending and investment on arms manufacture, nuclear arms included, employs fewer people than comparable sums. Writing in 1987, he highlights the possibilities for a worsening of this situation with the development of new technologies and manufacturing techniques. How much worse is the situation today? Ken Coates also highlights the examples from Lucas and Vickers where alternative plans for socially useful production were drawn up by the workforce and unions themselves. At the same time he is sensitive of the need to convince taxpayers that ‘their’ money can and will be used to meet pressing needs in the here and now – with the assumption that nuclear arms are not a ‘pressing need’!

So how are these needs to be identified? How are alternative plans to be formulated? Are they delivered from above or generated on the shop-floor? The argument presented here is that investment funds, once released from paying for weapons of mass destruction, can be diverted into converting the nuclear industry and the technologies associated with it to social good use. The mechanics of re-appropriating the money for other purposes is well established but the question of how to convert to socially useful production is less so.

The trade unions, Labour Party and labour movement more widely can

and should begin a wide-ranging discussion on these issues once more. Almost thirty years have passed since the TGWU conference and the question is as pressing now as it was then. Fundamentally, the question of what can be produced and how it can be produced should be a matter for the engineers, technicians, plant-operators and the other workers to consider. A utopian idea?

‘I am frequently asked if I believe that ordinary people are really able to cope with the complexities of advanced technology and modern industrial society. I have never met an ordinary person. All the people I meet are extraordinary...’

Mike Cooley, *Architect or Bee?*

## Notes

1. Elliott, Dave (1979), *The Lucas Aerospace workers' campaign*, Young Fabian Pamphlet 46.
2. Panitch, Leo and Leys, Colin (1997), *The End of Parliamentary Socialism*, Verso.
3. See: Coates, Ken and Topham, Tony (1967), *Participation or Control?*, Bertrand Russell Institute for Social Research, Pamphlet No. 1.
4. Lucas Aerospace: 12 Feb 1979: House of Commons debates.
5. Cooley, Mike (2016), *Architect or Bee: the human price of technology*, Spokesman.
6. See: Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards' Committee (1979), *Democracy versus the Circumlocution Office*, Institute for Workers' Control Pamphlet No. 65.

