

Trade unions and sustainable development

Reiner Hoffmann

Reiner Hoffmann is President of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) in Germany. He addressed the IPB World Congress, which had the title 'Disarm! For a Climate of Peace', at the Technical University in Berlin, and took conversion from military production as his theme, starting with the 'Lucas Plan'.

The issue of arms conversion has been at the heart of trade union peace policy for several decades. It was significantly influenced by the so-called 'Lucas Plan'. In the British company Lucas Aerospace in the mid-1970s around half of its output consisted of armaments. The business was threatened with mass redundancies, prompting the unions, led by Mike Cooley who was later sacked, to initiate a plan of their own. Output under this plan was to be converted to 'socially useful' products. All told, 150 different product ideas came about which, from today's point of view, still come over as extremely innovative – such as wind turbines, eco-friendly transport systems, dialysis machines, etc. These proposals found no favour in the company itself but won considerably more respect among colleagues in other firms, among politicians, researchers and environmental activists. The Lucas Plan became emblematic for grassroots peace movements. It was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Public esteem for the Lucas Plan was huge. Mike Cooley was invited by IG Metall to visit German plants. Many 'alternative production' working groups emerged in plants organised by the engineering union and put forward their own ideas for new products. Most of these proposals (such as low-slung buses and combined heat and power stations) were taken up by other producers and rarely put into effect in the plants they were meant for.

A successful example of a union-led conversion that would have been unthinkable without the Lucas Plan is the transformation of the tank factory MAK in Kiel into a plant for building locomotives. It

took over a decade until an investor could be won, in 2004, to take up the proposals of the works council. A further current example is the North Sea Plants in Emden where submarines were built by Thyssen-Krupp until 2010. As many as 1,400 employees were threatened with redundancy because of declining orders. The company board and employee representatives agreed a takeover via an investor in offshore wind parks (arrays). Despite turbulent economic times, the plant survived. Again, within the Airbus Group the unions and works councils are initiating more and more exemplary conversion ideas. Airbus Helicopters in Donauwörth was originally a purely military business and today its output is 80 per cent civil.

The debate around arms conversion in the 1980s proved one thing: conversion must be tied to an *industrial policy concept*. This was the hole in many first-time approaches and, at the same time, this aspect provides an opportunity now to implement arms conversion more efficiently. The very active 'Working Group on military technology and jobs' in the IG Metall union has drawn up progressive suggestions in this regard: for example, technology policy should focus more strongly on 'dual-use products' so that the transition from military to civil use can be carried out much more efficiently by shortening innovation cycles. This requirement is also an element in some research framework plans of the EU Commission. To buttress these technology policy demands, IndustriALL, the global association of engineering unions, has proposed sponsoring and setting up university institutes dedicated to research into civil products in defence technology companies.

The people putting the biggest brakes on arms conversion today remain the employers who regard as interference this involvement of their employees. Industrial democracy and co-determination must thus be the prime pre-condition for the success of a conversion project. In conglomerates embracing co-determination (e.g. Airbus) such projects are very feasible. In small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), if works councils put forward conversion ideas, these are more often seen as interference in management. But, since the great majority of German arms companies are conglomerates (civil and military), it's much easier to assess the prospects for implementing conversion plans.

Conversion processes often fail because of the greater profitability of military goods versus civil ones. So, many firms stick to armaments despite declining orders. And that makes it as plain as can be that any sustainable conversion can only take place with state backing.

The conversion debate among trade unions has picked up steam again

in recent years. At the last IG-Metall Union conference in 2015, the executive adopted a project for conversion and diversification in defence technology plants that contains three elements:

- Drawing up operational guidelines for innovation projects, with regional workshops on this topic;
- starting an industrial policy dialogue with politicians and employers;
- establishing a fund for diversification and conversion that can act to support company participants.

Further progress in restructuring the arms industry on these lines requires such a comprehensive strategy.

The two Germanys before the fall of the Wall employed, taken together, 400,000 in the arms industry. Today, that has dropped to roughly 90,000 in some 350 firms. Germany is currently, after the USA and Russia, the third biggest arms exporter in the world. Germany is even No 1 for submarines, and in second place for tanks. The source of the greatest harm to human beings is primarily small arms, of which there are plenty in production in Germany. But arms equipment amounts to a very small part – 0.6 per cent in 2013 – of overall German export volumes. The German arms industry is today just a statistical measure since it has now become so entwined at the European level that, when it comes to the bigger, technologically demanding projects, no single country can produce a military piece of equipment on its own. Therefore, we need a European perspective on the arms industry. A pre-requisite for that is a consequential disarmament strategy for the European Union. Actually, European integration itself is a conversion project. Over the centuries, Europe has produced the world's greatest number of weapons – and this must finally come to a halt!

What this shows is that we need a much broader debate on arms conversion. And we require it not least because of today's urgent challenges. German foreign minister Steinmeier sees a 'world out of joint' because of the many conflict areas. The rising number of refugees from crisis regions makes it essential that we get to grips with and combat the causes of flight – and that includes arms exports. The current debate about arms exports to crisis regions and the guidelines from economy minister Gabriel make that clear. We must reflect much more profoundly how we can bring sustainable peace to former war zones. Countries such as Colombia and Bosnia bring this home to us. In Germany we've created a parliamentary army with trade union rights. That's quite an achievement, given our history, that should serve as an example to other countries. As social actors we in the trade unions organise not just arms firms but the Army. That goes without saying in very few countries. So we have,

equally, positioned ourselves clearly against any intervention by the armed forces 'domestically'.

In the wake of the digitisation debate we're becoming aware of another challenge for the future. The dividing line between civil and military products is more and more fluid. Innovations created in the civil area of computer technology, both hardware and software, can be made applicable militarily. Cyber Wars have been reality for quite some time. The drones war has been waged intensely by the USA for many years. But also standard drones, that are meant to be used for civilian purposes only, have already been put to use in conflict regions. And militarily-led hacker attacks on the civil infrastructure of a country are possible. Digitisation must be made to play a role in peace and security policy. Let's face it: one can greatly influence many developments. We must prevent a 'digital law of the jungle'.

Right now, the relevance of climate change policy has become an issue for peace and justice. At the heart of many debates about transformative change, environmental catastrophes (such as drought, floods and despoliations of agricultural areas) are present as causes of migration and war. That's why the conversion of our economy may also play a part in drawing up a sustainable climate change policy under the sign of pacifism. For transformation cannot just mean the ecological dimension of our way of life, but we must also think about the social dimension as well. Poverty and inequality are at the very least just as much causes of migration and war. The increasingly gaping chasm between rich and poor is now being seen by many international organisations as a threat to conflict-free ways of communal living around the world.

Humanism and pacifism are two fundamental values of free trade unions. In the DGB's statutes it states:

'The federation and its member unions stand for a general and globally controlled disarmament, for the implementation and preservation of peace and freedom in the spirit of international understanding.'

War, terror, climate change, inequality, hunger and the growing migrant flows are a challenge to us now to rethink, from the bottom up, old beaten paths and to search for complex solutions. The concept of transformation fits here as its goal is to ensure a long-term basis for society as a living entity. Often, the way peace policy is applied is neglected. That's why this discussion deserves to be part and parcel of the IPB-Congress. The path to a peaceful, just and ecologically responsible world order must always be in our collective thoughts.