

# Eyewitness in Berlin

## **Socially useful production and the peace movement**

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Corbyn's Campaign and  
Standing up for Education,  
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Spokesman.*

Socially useful production loomed large over proceedings on the final day of the International Peace Bureau's World Congress, which convened in Berlin at the start of October 2016. Over one thousand delegates from peace organisations in seventy-five countries took stock, discussed and planned for the years ahead. Ingeborg Breines, co-president of IPB, opened with a call to combat the 'imperialist thinking' behind the idea that we must always be 'prepared for war'. Breines insisted that we must 'prepare for peace' and 'address the very real threat to the planet'. By creating 'an active disgust for war', we can create openings to explore and interrogate peaceful alternatives to militarisation, environmental destruction, climate change and social injustice. The work of the Lucas Aerospace Combine of shop stewards in the 1970s, and their inspirational alternative plan to convert from military to socially useful production, were major reference points for these discussions.

Trade unions were very well represented at the Congress and provided significant logistical and moral support during its preparation. Sharron Burrow – General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation – spoke in the opening plenary on how 'the peace imperative must now be a priority if we are to heal this fractured world'. Two days later, Reiner Hoffmann – President of the German Trade Union Confederation – spoke enthusiastically about the work of Mike Cooley, a leading figure in the Lucas Combine and author of *Architect or Bee? The human price of technology*, first published in 1980. Hoffmann explained how workers in the

German arms industry took inspiration from the Lucas Alternative Plan, citing the example of proposals from the works council at a tank manufacturer for conversion to train production and work done at Airbus's helicopter plant in Germany which has gone from producing for predominantly military purposes to a situation where 80% of production is now for civil purposes.

Hoffmann touched on barriers to the effective implementation of alternative, socially useful production. For example, the works council proposals for conversion from tank to train manufacture took ten years to realise. He argued that 'conversion must be tied into industrial policy' in order to secure 'efficient implementation', but noted that industrial policies – if they exist at all – insufficiently address conversion, despite the policy work undertaken by the IG Metall union and others. Hoffmann also pointed out that the biggest brake on conversion proposals is most often the attitude of employers. As with the Lucas Plan of the 1970s, employers view participation in the planning process as 'interference' with their 'right' to manage. Short-term profitability arguments are often invoked against conversion plans, even though – as in some sections of the arms industry – new orders are shrinking in the long term.

Hoffmann's ready enthusiasm for the Lucas experience, socially useful production and arms conversion is significant when you consider that Germany is among the five largest arms exporter in the world. From 2014 to 2015 total arms exports almost doubled from €3.96 billion to €7.86 billion. The arms industry is therefore a significant employer and substantial contributor to the German economy. Whereas in some countries these factors might make discussing alternative plans, conversion, demilitarisation and socially useful production sensitive topics, such discussions are embraced by the trade union movement in Germany.

UNI Global – the international service union organisation – and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, associated with the German Social Democratic Party, hosted a separate panel: '*Arms Conversion Reloaded: Turning Swords into Ploughshares in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?*' Philip Jennings, General Secretary of UNI, opened discussions with a forceful and wide-ranging survey of arms conversion: 'Whatever happened to Lucas? ... How do we rediscover the magic of the Lucas moment?', he asked. Jennings pointed out that we 'have unions and workers in the defence industry. We can be against nuclear weapons but [the unions] will defend jobs until the last moment. They do not trust the stories of conversion.' Echoing Reiner Hoffmann, Jennings pointed out that a governmental

industrial policy with the commitment of significant funds and a good dose of political determination will be necessary to make conversion plans credible and successful. Herbert Wulf, former director of the Bonn International Centre for Conversion, was somewhat pessimistic about securing conversion policies in the short term, mainly due to the extent to which the weapons trade is supported by governments, but he insisted that the potential did exist, including what he called ‘unused surplus capacities’ in production which might be put to work for socially useful purposes.

Peter Wilke, who works with IG Metall on conversion plans, touched upon the Lucas experience but argued that conversion plans have no concrete examples to replicate. He suggested that political demands should be combined with what is ‘doable’ and explained that IG Metall supports demands that are practical within the context of the existing German economy. He warned against the trade union movement getting involved in the ‘wrong kind of confrontation’.

The discussion in Berlin demonstrated a burgeoning enthusiasm amongst European trade unions and the global peace movement for the ideas related to socially useful production, which are reflected in the UK by the new edition of *Architect or Bee?*, introduced by Frances O’Grady, TUC General Secretary, with related discussions in *The Spokesman* (see no. 133). The discussion also demonstrated some of the challenges faced in realising such ideas in a practical sense. First amongst these challenges is to properly account for and popularise the background to the Lucas Alternative Plan. Second, to find a mechanism by which government policies are crafted to promote conversion and respond positively to alternative workers’ plans. Third, to positively work towards an understanding that what seems possible at any given time is not always the same as what is absolutely necessary.

In concluding his remarks on ‘Trade Unions and a Sustainable Policy of Peace’, Reiner Hoffmann argued that our movements need to ready themselves for a coming ‘transformation’: a moment when the necessary becomes possible.