

Pegged Back?

Keir Starmer

One of those paying attention to debates about workers' control, the Lucas Plan for socially useful production, and trade union engagement with the wider community was the young Keir Starmer. This excerpt is taken from 'Unions for a New Pluralism', published in the journal Socialist Alternatives in December 1986.

Keir Starmer MP is standing for election as Leader of the Labour Party.

... Over the last 20 years, a small trickle of workers' alternative plans have emerged. These are small but crucial adjuncts to traditional collective bargaining so often limited to wage and condition issues. Essentially, alternative plans challenge the managerial process of production (ie. capital's logic) and at the same time counterpose an alternative based on social needs of both workers and the wider community. Hence they allow a move beyond the purely defensive nature of traditional collective bargaining. Faced with an over-production crisis of capitalism, alternative plans conceive the need to restructure the economy but open the way for a restructuration on workers' terms. The experience of Lucas Aerospace and the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders are good examples – in both instances the initiative sprung from the threat of closure or massive job losses. The “Combine Committee” of shop stewards became an organ of representation of workers at the cross-plant and corporate level. This is important not only because of its “bottom upwards” structure (with most committee officials being no higher up union hierarchies than shop-stewards) but also because it cut across traditional union divides, workshop and skills, and hence was in a better position to articulate an overall perspective. Further, the combine committees expend their negotiating role beyond the narrow limits of the firm, into the community, discussing and negotiating with local authorities, the public sector, other industries, and community groups and organisations.

It would be inaccurate and incomplete to suggest that the combine committees that

have emerged so far have produced anything more than a qualified success. For example, at Lucas, most of the committee's proposals, if considered by management at all, were soon "pegged back", not because of technical problems of social implementation but as a result of corporate priorities and financial objectives. This highlights a fundamental problem. Whilst alternative plans do a great deal to boost workers confidence by defining an alternative and highlighting the real nature of the antagonism between capital and labour, without popular control of the needs and processes of production, they can do little more than extend collective bargaining into admittedly new and important areas of industrial policy.

Traditional industrial "pluralism" found its legitimacy in its "balancing" the interests of capital and labour. If capital's interest is rejected as a legitimate interest in the development of the socially useful economy, what interests should come into play in the decision making processes in the field of production? It is in answer to this question that a new role for trade unions begins to emerge. No one group can take ultimate control of all production decisions. A new pluralism must be evolved, "pluralism" that encompasses negotiating and counterposing the interests of the producers with the interests of the consumer/users, the community, women and minority groups, the unemployed, the environment, etc. This, of course, is a fundamentally anti-capitalist "pluralism". In this, the trade unions have a function as autonomous and independent articulators of the workers' interests in the socially useful economy: no longer negotiating with capital but bargaining the terms of production in and for the community.

Clearly, the bureaucratic-prone structures of the trade unions handicap their adoption and application of such a new strategy. Equally clearly, the total rejection of their "defensive" role would, today, simply mean sacrificing present workers in the pursuance of a then utopian "social pluralism", and threaten the essential nature of autonomous and independent unionism. Alongside and out of the existing structures of trade unions, must be developed a broader structure capable of constructive challenges to managerial prerogatives by developing more and more meaningful alternative plans, involving more and more the wider community (the ad-hoc structures set up in the miners' strike, whilst the main union structure remained intact, is a good example). It is important that these changes are part of traditional unionism for in reality they still represent the aspirations of the great majority of the workforce, and if the pluralism of the socially useful economy is to attain hegemony it must do so by pervading from the workforce rather than being imposed by "forces" external to existing workers' organisations, Hence, trade unions will have a central role in shaping the economy and re-shaping themselves.

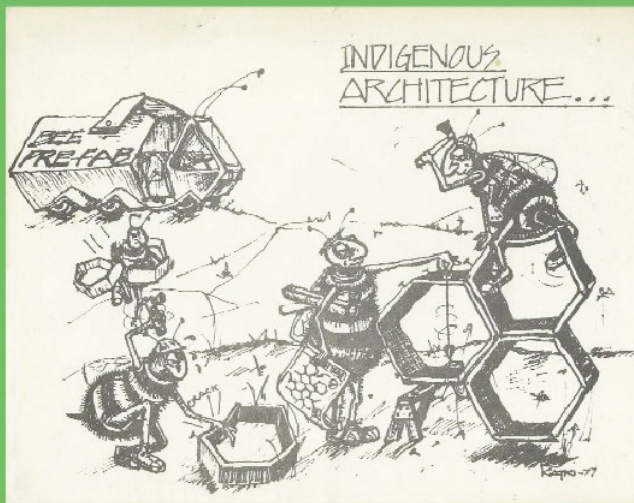
In 1986, therefore, the objectives are to retain the autonomous character of trade unions neither integrated into the state or the company; but to broaden trade unions horizontally both within the immediate working enterprise and beyond. This necessitates the fullest internal democracy to avoid vertical hierarchies dominating the unions. Such resulting horizontalism will encourage and pave the way for increasingly ambitious challenges to management prerogatives, whilst enabling day-to-day defensive struggles to maximise their efficiency.

The story of the Lucas Workers' Plan of 1976

ARCHITECT or BEE?

The Human Price of Technology

Mike Cooley



Introduction by
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