

Taking control

Mike Davis on a pioneering study inspired by the Lucas Plan

ARCHITECT OR BEE? THE HUMAN PRICE OF TECHNOLOGY

Mike Cooley (Spokesman, £10.99)

This was a ground-breaking book when first published in 1980. Today in the midst of global warming and economic turbulence with continuing deindustrialisation in Britain, its republication is both timely and its message prescient.

Cooley was an engineer who achieved an international reputation as an activist trade unionist and academic. The centrepiece of his thinking was that technology and automation need not be driven by destructive arms production and capitalist profit maximisation. Nor need the process be alienating and repetitive for the worker.

Rather the skills and ingenuity of workers could be harnessed in the creative design of human centred socially useful production.

Cooley came up with a huge variety of ideas, developed with colleagues in trade unions. These included the hybrid road rail bus,

prototypes of city cars and medical equipment for developing countries. The book is more a mosaic of sketches and views drawn widely from speeches in Trafalgar Square to conference papers. The ideas were worked out in practice and brought together in this volume. It may be uneven, and a little technical and dated in places, but actual experi-

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ence is like that.

The title always intrigued me. It's from Karl Marx and means that while the bee creates hugely complex cell structures the human architect creates in her imagination that which s/he will ultimately erect in reality. Future planning is the difference. So we have choices. The book has a new introduction by TUC head Frances O'Grady. She highlights

the speed of technological change today with the internet revolution, globalisation and financialisation and mass migration. Advances in technology can lead to job destruction, lower wages and work intensification. But as Cooley reminds us they can also be liberating, freeing us from routine drudgery. Technology can make us more skilled and employable with work more stimulating and fulfilling.

Ultimately this is a question of power. How can workers win the political and industrial battle for control?

O'Grady echoes Cooley in underlining the value of the worker's voice in the process of economic change. Cooley was a founder member of the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee and co-author of its alternative plan.

At a time of growing uncertainty and insecurity, the ideas in this book provide valuable insights for an alternative route map for genuine workers control and human centred production. **C**