

Lucas Aerospace : 'THE RIGHT TO WORK ON

"IT'S A SCANDAL". That was the reaction of Ernie Scarbrow, secretary of the Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee to the Government's announcement last week of an £8 million handout to Lucas Aerospace.

Two months earlier, the company had announced plans to close important factories in Liverpool, Bradford, Shipley and Hemel Hempstead with the loss of over 2,000 jobs within two years. These closures are being fought tooth and nail by Lucas Aerospace workers and their main weapon in the battle

is the 'alternative' Corporate Plan for the Company, drawn up by the workers themselves.

The Corporate Plan is a direct challenge to Lucas Management and to all it stands for. It has harnessed the skills, enthusiasm and creativity of hundreds of Lucas workers — designers, draughtsmen, skilled and semi-skilled workers — who have developed over 150 different products which could be made by the workforce using the existing plant and equipment at its 17 sites.

The range of products is staggering — from a portable kidney machine to a vehicle that can run on both road and rail; from a Hobcart for children with Spina Bifida to a totally new power unit for cars, coaches, lorries or trains. But the one thing these products have in common is that they are socially useful. They are not trivial luxuries. They are not designed to make life even more comfortable for a rich and powerful minority

at the expense of everyone else. They are part of a campaign for the right to work on socially useful products, rather than face the demoralisation and poverty of the dole.

Despite the £8 million handout from the Government, Lucas Aerospace is still determined to close down the four factories. But with the Government money, it will now be building a small purpose built factory in Liverpool. This is just what Lucas wanted. A few jobs will stay in Liverpool but overall the 2,000 jobs will still be lost — but now

it's with the support of the Government.

Meanwhile, the Government has given no support to the Corporate Plan, and an executive member of the combine committee, Mike Cooley, is now threatened with sacking by the company because of his work on the plan. There are even signs that Bro. Cooley will get no support nationally from his union AUEW/TASS, of which he is a past President. Alan Hayling explains the background.

It all started in 1971. Lucas Aerospace had announced the closure of the Chandos Road factory in Willesden, London, with the loss of over 800 jobs, the first move in what the workers expected would be an extensive rationalisation programme in the company. It was a hard fought battle. The workers occupied the plant day and night for more than eight weeks. But still they were defeated.

As they pointed out, over 3,000 people die each year in Britain because they cannot get a kidney machine. If you are under fifteen or over forty five it is almost impossible in many areas to get one. Instead the doctors will allow the patient to go "into decline" as they nicely put it. They pointed out that in the winter of 1975-6, 980 old people died of cold in the London area alone, when Lucas Aerospace has the capability of

"It has given us a creative cross-fertilisation between the analytic power of the scientist and technologist on the one hand and, perhaps what is more important, the direct class sense and understanding of those on the shop floor."

PREPARING THE CORPORATE PLAN

The first step of the new combine committee was, they now admit with hindsight, a mistake. They wrote to 180 leading authorities institutions, universities and trade unions all of which had in the past suggested the use of technology in a socially responsible fashion.

They asked them very specifically what could a workforce with these facilities be making that would be of great benefit to the community at large. They received only four useful replies.

A WORKERS SURVEY

They then turned to the Lucas workers themselves, and asked them what they should be making. Each of the shop stewards committees in the Combine was asked to complete a questionnaire, taking it onto the shop floor, getting all types of workers involved. And within four weeks the answers came pouring in.

"We deliberately composed it so that they would think of themselves in their dual role in society, as both producers and as consumers. We therefore quite deliberately bridge the absurd division in this society which seems to suggest that there are two nations, on that works in factories and offices and an entirely different nation that lives in houses and communities. We pointed out in the questionnaire that the kind of products in which we were interested and which we might design and build during the day at work should be meaningful in relation to the communities in which we live."

(Combine committee spokesperson)

GETTING THE MASS OF WORKERS INVOLVED

One of the principles on which the Combine Committee has worked is that the Corporate Plan had to involve the mass of Lucas Aerospace workers. Not just the shop stewards. Not just the highly qualified designers. They wanted to involve the whole workforce and people from the communities around the factories as well.

...."in the winter of 1975-6, 980 old people died of cold in the London area alone, when Lucas Aerospace has the capability of designing and manufacturing a cheap system for heating homes, and the thousands of electricians on the dole have the capability of installing such systems."

It was clear that a different tactic had to be developed to fight a powerful and sophisticated multinational like Lucas. As one of the workers involved in the Willesden struggle said:

"We realised that the morale of the workforce very quickly declines if they can see that society, for whatever reason, doesn't want the products they make. We therefore evolved the idea of a campaign for the right to work on socially useful products. It seemed absurd to us that we had all this skill and knowledge and facilities and that society urgently needed equipment and services which we could provide, and yet the market economy seemed incapable of linking these two."

There was no doubt that Lucas Aerospace contained some of the most skilled designers and workers in any company based in Britain. They designed and built equipment for Concorde, for missiles, for fighter-bombers, for gas turbines. The workers had equally no doubt that their skills could be put to better use, and that there was no need for any of them to go on the dole.

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FOUNDING THE SHOP STEWARDS COMBINE COMMITTEE

By the time of the Willesden struggle the Combine Committee was already coming into existence — organising all 17 Lucas Aerospace factories into one united force. This, they felt, was the only way of fighting the company's rationalisation plans. They'd seen how GEC chairman Arnold Weinstock had succeeded in sacking 60,000 highly skilled workers by turning one GEC factory against the other. And they were determined the same wouldn't happen to them.

The combined shop stewards' committee at Lucas Aerospace is unique in the British trade union movement in that it links together the highest level technologists and the semi-skilled workers on the shop floor. This has been of great importance in the development of the Corporate Plan.

Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee

THE CORPORATE PLAN

A positive alternative to recession and redundancies

A BIG FLAME INTERVIEW

'Marxist Economics For Socialists'

'What is true is that the traditional wage militancy of the working class is inadequate in a period of crisis; because if it is successful it makes the crisis worse. What is needed is a strategy that both protects current pay and job conditions and shows a way of moving to a socialist system by building up elements of workers' control.'

JOHN HARRISON has written the recently published *"Marxist Economics for Socialists"*. The book is extremely important in that it makes clear the key role of Marxist economics in the struggle against reformism and social democracy. Unlike most Marxist economics books, it does not take bourgeois economics as its reference point. It is an essential book for militants who want to understand the economic laws that govern the society we live under.

One of the key points that you make in your book is that methods like reflation the economy that have been used by capitalist governments for the last 40 years are no longer working. Can you explain why you think that this is the case?

The point is that there is a contradiction between two aims of the capitalists — increasing consumption and cutting wages. If the capitalists want to increase the consumption of their products they must increase the wages of the workers. By stimulating the economy, they can increase production and lower unemployment. But if there is less unemployment, workers are more likely to fight for higher wages and so the capitalists find it difficult to increase their rate of profit. If the capitalists cut back on production, they can force wages down but they are unable to sell their products — so there is a problem of realising their profits — you haven't made the profit until the goods are sold.

Is this because it is the working class that buys what the capitalists produce?

Yes, this is especially true of consumer goods. It is also true that the demand for the machines that are used in the factories that

SOCIALLY USEFUL PRODUCTS'

This has been more successful in some areas than others. In Burnley, the whole plant stopped work for a couple of hours to hold a mass meeting to debate their answers to the questionnaire. And this has been followed by a public meeting in the Town Hall about the Corporate Plan. In some other plants, the questionnaire never got beyond the shop stewards committee. But even then it forced the stewards to think about the real possibilities of what their plant could produce, with the existing skills and equipment. It forced workers to think not only about their own section but also about the section next door - about what it could produce if it was freed for useful production. In a small way, the questionnaire began to break down the isolation and sectionalism that's encouraged by managements, and is typical of so many factories in Britain.

WHAT THE WORKERS CAME UP WITH

● health services

"Some of our members realised that a large percentage of the people who die of heart attacks die between the point at which the attack occurs and the stage at which they are located in the intensive care unit in the hospital. So they designed a light, simple, portable life support system which can be taken in an ambulance to keep the patient ticking over until they get to hospital."

Workers at the Wolverhampton plant visited a centre for children with Spina Bifida and were horrified to see that they could only move around by literally crawling on the floor. So they designed a vehicle called the Hobcart - so successful that the Spina Bifida Association of Australia wanted to order 2,000 of these. Lucas would not agree to manufacture them because they said it was incompatible with their product range.

● Alternative energy sources:

Drawing on their experience of advanced aerodynamics, they have designed a range of wind generators. They have proposed a method for storing the heat of the summer for use during the cold of the winter, using hydrogen fuel cells. They have developed a low-cost set of solar-collecting equipment - part of an overall scheme to enable working-class people who have no previous experience of building work to design and build low energy homes in their own communities.

And they've proposed a whole range of products which would be useful for developing countries. But as they say:

"At the moment our trade with these countries is neo-colonialist. Our products would tend towards making the developing coun-

tries more independent and self reliant."

● Alternative transport:

While car manufacturers are currently perfecting an engine which will be automatically replaced every 20,000 miles, the Lucas workers have designed and built a combined battery and petrol powered engine which will last for twenty years, improve fuel consumption by over half, will reduce pollution

the skill of the miner would still be used but the miner could go through the mining process remotely in a safe environment whilst the telechiric device actually did the mining for him. As he or she tightened their hands, so the machine would tighten its hands. And the miner would see via a TV monitor, would hear via a radio, would feel via another device and so on.

...."we have discovered that management is not a skill or craft or profession but a command relationship - a bad habit handed on from the Army and Church."

by 80% will be practically silent and which will require negligible maintenance.

● Robots:

It's in the design of robotic equipment mainly for the maintenance of North Sea oil pipelines - that it is clearest that the Lucas workers have had to think deeply about the future of society and about the quality of life of the mass of the people. Did they want to design robots that would rob people of jobs in which they could develop their skills, grow and develop as human beings?

"Thus we human beings would continue to be involved in that precious learning process which comes about through actually working on the physical world, and it would mean also that we would be countering structural unemployment."

The Lucas workers point to the forecasts of 5 million unemployed by the mid 1980's because of the effect of the use of mini-computers and automated machinery. Not all socialists will like the solutions they've come up with. But at least they're asking the right questions.



Workers at Lucas Aerospace Burnley Plant C.I.S. PHOTO

"When we were considering the design of robotic equipment, the more we thought about this the more it became clear the terrible waste we are making of the great human intelligence which is available to us."

So, instead of hugely expensive and energy consuming robots to do the job, the Lucas Corporate Plan includes in their place a range of remote-control devices which actually require more human skill, while reducing the danger and physical effort of the work. They call them "telechiric" devices which literally means hands or control at a distance. So, in the case of a miner,

THE RESPONSE OF THE COMPANY AND THE GOVERNMENT

The Company clearly understood the importance of the Corporate Plan. They saw it as a threat. A threat to their plans to sack thousands of workers. And a threat to their so-called "right to manage". As one of the returned questionnaires from a site shop stewards' committee said:

"In thinking about this questionnaire we have discovered that management is not a skill or craft or profession but a command relationship - a bad habit handed on from the Army and Church."

The company has now centrally rejected the Corporate Plan and refuse to even meet the Combine Committee to discuss it. They say that *"the existing product range is our best guarantee of work."* forgetting that they want to sack two thousand workers almost immediately.

But fighting this was the whole purpose of the Corporate Plan. And its success has been that in the four years of its existence, the Plan has so mobilised the Lucas workforce and begun to influence a number of MP's (for what they're worth) and trade union officials (for what they're worth) that Lucas management have not been able to make one sacking.

The Combine Committee approached the Government and *"had every sympathy short of actual help."* Junior Ministers like Les Huckfield have written saying *"In my considered view those best suited to deal with this question are the company and the trade unions involved."* In other words "Piss off".

"There can be no islands of responsibility and concern in the sea of irresponsibility and depravity."

COMING TO A CRUNCH

Now the situation at Lucas Aerospace is coming to a crunch. Management is determined to press ahead with the closure of the four factories. Already the Combine has taken action. There was a three day occupation at the Victor Works in Liverpool. And the removal of all machinery and the transfer between plants of all design and technical information has been banned by the workers.

In the past month, the management even went to the extent of threatening the dismissal of Mike Cooley, the Chairman of TASS/AUEW in Lucas Aerospace and executive member of the Combine Committee, for working on the Corporate Plan. This threat was withdrawn following the decision of the Combine Committee to call all-out strike action should the threat be carried out.

Instead the complaint has been referred by the company to AUEW/TASS, the union to which Mike Cooley belongs. Unhappily, but not surprisingly, the union nationally has indicated already that it will not support Brother Cooley, *"because the Corporate Plan is not official policy of the union."* This is despite the widespread support that the Plan has won in the trade union movement - to the extent that the TUC has even made a film about the Plan.

FIGHTING THE MULTI-NATIONALS

Despite these setbacks, workers in a number of other large companies have seen the strengths of the Corporate Plan in fighting the plans of the multinationals for rationalisation, sackings, closures and harder work for those left at work. Already similar initiatives are under way by workers in Rolls Royce, the British Aircraft Corporation (Preston), Chrysler, Vickers and Clarke Chapman.

DANGERS

But there are some dangers in relying on this sort of Corporate Plan. There's no doubt that some moderates see it as a useful way of diverting energy from the main struggle - against the class divisions and exploitation inherent in this society. And these same moderates would doubtless be delighted to use such a Plan instead of industrial action in the struggle against redundancies and closure.

Then there's the charge that such a Corporate Plan is just tinkering with the system, trying to do away with some of its worst idiocies. Just an attack on the more unacceptable face of capitalism, rather than an attack on capitalism itself.

At Lucas, there's an awareness of these problems. As they write in the Corporate Plan itself:

"There can be no islands of responsibility and concern in the sea of irresponsibility and depravity."

PLAN IS ONLY ONE WEAPON

They see the struggle for what they produce as part of the overall struggle for working class power - and they've already been forced to take action to prevent Lucas selling off their kidney machine production to a Swiss company. In the Combine Committee, the Corporate Plan is seen as another weapon in the struggle - alongside industrial action - occupations, strikes and other measures - one more way of developing the power, solidarity and self-confidence of the mass of workers against the immense power of the multinationals.

And so far it's worked. For four years there has been not one redundancy. But with the Government wading in on the side of Lucas, and with the attitude of AUEW/TASS, there's little doubt that from now on the fighting's going to get rough.

make consumer goods is a derived demand - if there is no demand for the consumer goods there is no demand for the machines. This is clearly not the case in the case of arms production where the finished products are not bought by the working class - in that respect arms production is very useful for the capitalists.

This month at the summit of EEC prime-ministers in Bonn, there will be an attempt to get an agreement to get out of the current crisis by reflation on a European scale. Will they get such an agreement and could it work?

No, because what is a contradiction on a national scale would be moved to a contradiction on an international scale. If there was reflation at a European level, this would lead to inflation on a world scale that would strengthen the working class internationally.

What Marx wrote about the 'reserve army of labour' is important here. There is no doubt that the presence of millions of unemployed affects the militancy of those who do have a job.

One of the things that follow from your explanation of the crisis is that the working class is stronger in a period of economic boom - when there is less unemployment. And this would explain the retreat of the industrial working class in the current economic crisis.

This is true up to a point. But it is important to remember that the working class has entered this crisis strong and well organised. Whereas it entered the crisis of the 1930's with its strength broken - by the General Strike and the victory of Fascism in Italy and Germany. What is true is that the traditional wage militancy of the working class is inadequate in a period of crisis; because if it is successful it makes

CONFERENCE OF SOCIALIST ECONOMISTS

This year's Conference of Socialist Economists is being held in Bradford University from July 14th-16th. Its main theme is "the development of class struggles in advanced capitalist countries." The conference has in the past been an important forum for discussion amongst revolutionary socialists.

the crisis worse. What is needed is a strategy that both protects current pay and job conditions and shows a way of moving to a socialist system by building up elements of workers' control.

Do you see the proposals of the Bullock report as having any role to play in this process?

I am very hostile to Bullock. There is a very great difference between workers' participation in management under capitalism and workers' control which begins with the power to veto management decisions. This would be the embryo of dual power at factory level.

You write in your book that the Labour Party and social-democracy can only retain its hold on the working class in a situation where there is economic growth and it is able to give some of the crumbs of this economic growth to the working class. But the fact is that recent by-elections make it clear that three years of austerity have not lost working class support for the Labour government.

My argument is that it is impossible to win the working class from social democracy in a period of boom and that in a crisis, there is a possibility of this happening. I am not saying it will happen automatically; a lot depends on the ability of the revolutionary left to develop a coherent strategy. All I am arguing is that in a crisis there is less support for 'middle ground' positions - there is also the possibility of the growth of support for fascist positions.

Still I think your book under-estimates the hold social-democracy has over large sectors of the working class - it is much more than an economic relationship that ends when the goodies run out.

Maybe so. But I reckon that many working class people are still voting Labour not because of any strong ideological commitment to social democracy but because the alternatives are so much worse.

(*'Marxist Economics for Socialists'* is published by Pluto Press at £2.40)