

What can academics learn from the Lucas Plan?

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Almost half a century ago, a group of workers representing a cross section of the Lucas Aerospace workforce formed a 'combine' and did something extraordinary: they challenged management's right to control and direct the means of production by proposing an alternative corporate plan (1).

Part of a wider movement for workers' control in the 1970s, shop stewards at different Lucas Aerospace factories and from different sections of the workforce both 'skilled' and 'unskilled' - came together to get ahead of the rationalisation of heavy industry that was signalled so evocatively by Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' speech at the 1963 Labour Party conference.

Rather than await the inevitable mass redundancies that firms like Lucas Aerospace argued were 'necessary' to maintain profitability in the face of global competition, the Lucas Combine looked at how the means of production in heavy industry could be repurposed to meet the growing need for 'socially useful' products, and therefore put apparently 'redundant' jobs and unused productive capacity at the service of society.

Based on answers to a wide-ranging questionnaire - which challenged members of the affiliated trade unions to suggest ideas based on their experience of personal and community needs - the Lucas Combine proposed 'approximately 150 products' in 'six major areas of technological activity': oceanic, telechiric (remotely operated) machines, transport systems, braking systems, alternative energy sources and medical equipment.

For its ground-breaking ideas for alternative energy sources alone - which included proposals for

the development of heat pumps, solar cell technology, wind turbines and fuel cell technology - the Lucas Plan has become legendary as an unprecedented intervention in the politics of climate change and a 'just transition' to a green and sustainable future.

However, it is for the Lucas Plan's bold foray into the politics of expertise and knowledge that I argue it is of interest to academics in their ongoing struggle against marketisation (2).

While struggles over pay and pensions are important, they must be used as a springboard to questions concerning the social use of knowledge production and of universities and, by extension, the place of the latter within wider struggles against austerity and neoliberalism.

Lesson 1: form a combine

While the Lucas Plan is remembered mostly for its ambitious attempt to wrest control from management, this bold initiative would not have been possible without the unique organisational form that the shop stewards at the various Lucas Aerospace sites created to get ahead of rationalisation: the Combine.

The Lucas Combine cut across traditional divisions between skilled and unskilled labour, as well as existing trade union structures. The Lucas shop stewards understood that a different kind of organisation was needed to confront effectively the power of management, which was in the process of consolidating the various Lucas Aerospace operations into a single, massive corporation. 'This

gave the combine a rare advantage', Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott explain in their authoritative book on the Lucas Plan (3). 'From the start the discussions of the Lucas Combine Committee placed an emphasis on strategic thinking and advance planning'.

In other words, by transcending the arbitrary divisions of labour created by management to separate knowledge and production - taking control over the labour process away from workers - the Lucas Combine was able to get ahead of management initiatives, restructures and redundancies.

Essentially, the Combine socialised the separate knowledges of the various sections of the workforce, creating a strategic overview like that of management but oriented to social need, rather than to profit. The Combine also, by socialising the intelligence of workers, laid the organisational and intellectual foundations for the later Alternative Plan.

In universities today, there is also an arbitrary division of labour between those that produce and reproduce knowledge (academics, researchers, teachers), administer the structures that enable this process (administrative staff) and ensure the efficiency of the university's physical apparatus (facilities staff).

These divisions are also represented by separate trade union structures - such as the University and College Union (UCU), Unison and Unite respectively (there are other unions representing staff in higher education) - which do not necessarily communicate or coordinate effectively.

Imagine the power of a university combine. Leveraging the disciplinary knowledge of academics - Human Resources, Finance, Social Theory, etc - combined with the tacit, insider knowledge and day-to-day control of the university apparatus represented by administrative and facilities staff, the expertise mobilised within such a combine would not only match that of management, but actually outstrip it.

As university managers have become increasingly detached from what is actually happening on the ground as universities furiously expand to compete in the higher education market, university combines could strategically get ahead of their plans and win key battles that would shift the balance of power away from irresponsible vice-chancellors and build the confidence of workers on the ground.

Lesson 2: self-educate

Following a significant victory at Burnley, which saw Combine members occupy the site to defend a group of low paid workers' right to collectively

bargain, the Combine turned to the issue of pensions.

Anticipating moves towards the privatisation of employee pension schemes on the part of the Conservative UK government at the time, interested members of the combine began educating themselves in the politics and financial intricacies of pension schemes, in the absence of any interest from existing union structures, even the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Self-created pensions experts like Ray Middleton were tasked with educating rank-and-file Lucas Aerospace workers about how pensions worked, and through a series of 'teach-ins' spread knowledge through the rank-and-file about 'how pension funds were controlled, what actuaries did, and what were the interests and ploys of the company in running their own pensions schemes'.

Thanks again to its innovative and radically democratic organisation of knowledge, the Combine won its demands, including equal pensions for women, 2:1 contributions from the employer and a two thirds end of salary 'defined benefits' scheme.

Earlier this year [2018. Ed.], UCU members went on strike over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Pension Scheme (USS), with academics and academic-related staff at pre-1992 universities going on strike for an unprecedented 14 days during February and March.

This proved to be the most successful - and most grassroots-supported and driven - industrial action in the union's history, with UCU members defeating the proposal to convert the USS from a defined benefit to a defined contributions scheme and forcing an independent review of the system.

Self-education played a crucial role in this victory. During the strikes, rank-and-file UCU members - not necessarily pensions 'experts' - autonomously began researching the USS, debunking claims made by employers regarding the unsustainability of defined benefits in a series of influential articles on member blogs.

As grassroots interest and knowledge of pensions grew - with the 'USS Briefs' website (4) consolidating and focusing the movement for self-education - rank-and-file members through local branches began to exert a greater level of control over the union's centralised decision-making apparatus.

UCU activists, working with other unions in combines, need to build on the momentum of the USS strike. In particular, the movement for self-education within the union must more effectively link struggles over pay and pensions to the more fundamental struggle against marketisation in higher education and to wider struggles against austerity and neoliberalism.

Lesson 3: create an alternative plan

The success of 'approaching things deeply' encouraged the Lucas Combine to set up a Science and Technology Advisory Committee dedicated to researching and anticipating 'problems arising from the introduction of new technology or production processes' in Lucas Aerospace.

The long process of building an organisation adequate to deal with the corporatisation of Lucas Aerospace and able to get ahead of the rationalisation that accompanied such corporatisation led directly to the formulation of an alternative corporate plan.

Crucially, the Lucas Combine realised that unless it challenged the very logic of rationalisation - the reduction of all industrial processes and labour activity to the single objective of increasing profitability - its members would be forever on the defensive, moving from one industrial battle to the next, eventually becoming exhausted and losing the war.

Thus, the formation of an alternative plan based on social-use, rather than on profit, was not only a radical questioning of the capitalist system of production as a whole, but a 'prefigurative' example of how production could be socialised and how trade unions could be also repurposed to provide a means of achieving such socialisation.

Universities are now behaving like corporations. The refusal to raise the pay of university staff, or to reduce the reliance on precarious contracts, are both symptoms of the corporatisation of universities. Unless university workers respond to this underlying change in universities from public institutions to private and increasingly multi-national corporations, university unions will be stuck in an endless loop of industrial action aimed at defending what has already been lost.

Furthermore, if university workers - especially academics - remain focused on defending the lost autonomy of the publicly-funded university, rather than on imagining what a truly social and democratic university of the future might look like, they will fail to win the support of the public, beleaguered by austerity and crushed by neoliberal inequality.

UCU activists also need to get outside the university, and, like the Lucas Combine, ask the communities surrounding what are now key players in local economies what they need from their local university.

While universities in local enterprise partnerships and newly formed combined authorities Hoover up any funding streams relating to 're-skilling' - often related to high-tech industries which employ only a tiny fraction of the UK workforce - thousands of people in local communities languish in poorly paid

and insecure work they are uninterested in or over-qualified for.

The demand for decent contracts for early career academics, for example, can be linked to the demand for 'good jobs', and for a future when young people don't just look forward to working in precarious, low-paid service sector jobs. By linking campaigns against marketisation with the real social needs of local communities, university workers can build strong foundations of solidarity that will help these campaigns sustain momentum and gain popular support.

The Lucas Plan taught us that organised workers could demand not only fair pay and conditions, but the power to transform their industry for good. It's a lesson workers in every sector would do well to learn.

Notes

1. Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Steward Committee (1976) 'Corporate Plan: a Contingency Strategy as a Positive alternative to Recession and Redundancies' (Summary) [Online] Available from: <http://lucasplan.org.uk/story-of-the-lucas-plan/> [Last accessed 22nd December 2018]
2. See also my other work on marketisation, in particular the 'Willets the Conqueror' series, which you can find on the HE Marketisation blog: <https://hemarketisation.wordpress.com/willets-the-conqueror/>
3. Wainwright, H. and Elliott, D. (1982) *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* London: Allison & Busby
4. <https://ussbriefs.com/>

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