

# Still a new trade unionism in the making?

**David Ridley** (*Branch Secretary, Coventry University UCU*) *draws some lessons from the recent conference marking the 40th anniversary of the Lucas Plan.*

**O**n 26th November 2016, a conference was held to celebrate The Lucas Plan, 'a pioneering effort by workers at the arms company Lucas Aerospace to retain jobs by proposing alternative, socially useful applications of the company's technology and their own skills. It remains one of the most radical and forward thinking attempts ever made by workers to take the steering wheel and directly drive the direction of change'.

The day began with a screening of Steve Sprung's documentary *The Plan*, a work in progress which tells the story through interviews and archival footage of the Lucas Plan. Already the film cleverly and emotionally conveys both the social and historical context within which the Lucas Plan was created, and its ongoing importance for today's situation.

The 52-page summary of the Lucas Plan reports how Harold Wilson, Labour Prime Minister from 1964 to 1970, 'lubricated' the 'white heat of technological change' in heavy industries, leading to the 'burning up' of thousands of jobs and to structural unemployment. In his plenary speech, Phil Asquith, a key member of the Lucas Aerospace Combine, described how the trade union movement at the time failed to offer effective resistance to the two major threats of structural unemployment and globalisation.

The Combine Committees were a direct response to the corporate mergers and rationalisations of the 1970s. These mergers and rationalisations were making it easier to overcome existing forms of workplace organisation, which were at that point still

based on geographical and craft divisions. Mick Coomey recounted the situation at that time as one in which different unions all negotiated at different times, often undermining each other, all operating with their own immovable, often undemocratic, structures.

The Combine was an attempt to overcome these divisions by appealing to the common interest of workers within Lucas Aerospace. They 'set up a series of advisory services' including advice on pensions provisions and safety in the use of new equipment. The Combine also produced its own 'four page illustrated newspaper' which was distributed bi-monthly to 13,000 manual and staff workers.

But the most significant achievement of the Combine was the creation of the Corporate Plan. Formulated after a meeting with the late Tony Benn, who suggested its creation, the 'object of the Corporate Plan [was] twofold. Firstly to protect our members' right to work by prioritising a range of alternative products on which they could become engaged in the event of further cutbacks in the aerospace industry. Secondly to ensure that among the alternative products proposed are a number which would be socially useful to the community at large'.

In response to a questionnaire distributed to Lucas Aerospace workers, 150 socially useful products were suggested. Among those selected for further research were green innovations decades ahead of their time, such as 'heat pumps, solar cell technology, wind turbines and fuel cell technology'. In transport, 'a new hybrid power pack for motor

vehicles and road-rail vehicles was proposed'. Later, the Combine produced a road-rail bus, which toured the country.

Although the plan was 'rejected out of hand' by Lucas Aerospace management, as the Combine members at the conference noted, both original aims were achieved: no compulsory redundancies were inflicted and socially useful products were created. John Routley left the Combine to set up the Unit for the Development of Alternative Products (UDAP) at what was then the Coventry Polytechnic, and Mike Cooley went on to have a lasting influence on ideas of 'socially useful production' with his book *Architect or Bee? The Human Price of Technology*.

### Lessons for trade union activism today

But does the Lucas Plan still offer a new form of trade unionism? Absolutely. In my own trade union, the University and College Union (UCU), we face a fundamental restructuring of our industry comparable to that of the heavy industries in the 1970s and 80s. A neoliberal government is determined to sell out higher education to private investment, introducing global 'alternative providers' into a 'quasi-market'. Locally, modern universities are restructuring themselves to be able to compete, creating group corporate forms with outsourced and appallingly casualised workforces on significantly diminished terms and conditions.

As with trade unions at the time of the Lucas Plan, the first instinct is always to protect existing jobs and the integrity of the particular craft basis of that job. In UCU, there are some people that think we should continue to fight and strike for pay in the face of increasing uncertainty due to Brexit and marketisation. But this approach, which is a stubborn defence of what is already lost, will get us nowhere and is losing support amongst rank and file members. It is a difficult time for the union, the employer is strong, and both management and the membership are deeply anxious about the future.

More forward-thinking elements within UCU have pushed the union towards fighting casualisation and winning collective bargaining rights for outsourced workers, but the Lucas Plan suggests an even more radical approach. We need to reject not just the insulting offers of the employers' associations but also the premises of the entire argument. At a local level, we should be presenting alternative plans for the sustainability of both institutions and jobs with decent pay and decent terms and conditions.

The higher education industry is booming. More students than ever want to go to university, and the fees are mostly fixed at £9,000. Of course, we

should always be fighting for free higher education funded by progressive taxation, but if the 2016-17 Higher Education Bill goes through, we must have a contingency plan. Universities, encouraged by the removal of the student numbers cap, see frantic short term growth as the way to ride out the storm of marketisation. The most ambitious universities are looking to double their student numbers, invest millions of pounds in capital projects and engage in hugely speculative national and international expansion.

According to the latest HEFCE forecasts concerning the 'Financial health of the higher education sector', however, 'this level of growth may be a challenge given the decline in the 18 year-old English population, uncertainties over the impacts of Brexit and increases in alternatives to undergraduate courses, such as degree apprenticeships'. The HEFCE briefing, along with the 2015 briefing from Grant Thornton, the main auditor for the higher education institutions, *Thrive or Survive?*, point out that the sector is currently financially healthy. This raises the question, is the solution of rapid growth the right way to go?

Existing higher education institutions should concentrate on quality, not quantity. From a trade union perspective, this does not mean playing the game with league tables, metrics and student satisfaction surveys, but investing in staff, improving terms and conditions and investing in teaching infrastructure, not just student accommodation to cope with this growth and impressive buildings to attract more students. Instead of becoming more like 'alternative providers', in a race to the bottom, we should be concentrating on maintaining and growing the reputation for quality of our institutions. When it becomes clear that these alternative providers are in it for profit not education, it will be the universities that stood their ground that will survive.

In the 2015 Green Paper on higher education, *Fulfilling our potential: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*, the Government happily admitted it didn't know what 'excellence' in teaching meant, which is the proxy concept for quality. That is because it is the people who engage in and support teaching, including students, who know about quality. This knowledge cannot be captured by metrics because it is tacit knowledge that is acquired and developed in experience. If we want quality, we need to democratise the corporate plans of our universities, so that they include this 'really useful knowledge' generated in practice.

The Lucas Plan did this, not through the questionnaires handed out to workers, but through the ongoing process of inquiry that the idea of 'socially useful production' generated. As Mick

Cooney said, the corporate plan was never finished. The lesson to be learned from the Lucas Plan concerns process not product. In her plenary speech, Hilary Wainwright argued that with the Combine, tacit knowledge was socialised rather than individualised or extracted and transferred to the machine. I would argue that this knowledge is always already social, and through the process of creating an alternative plan, the Combine overcame the alienation of intellect and labour that is fundamental to Taylorist rationalisation.

### **Broad-based campaigning and climate change**

The creation of localised alternative plans is only the first step. We need to become far more ambitious in the face of overwhelming difficulty. Trade union branches need to not only be arguing for alternatives within the workplace, but for the whole local community. If we look again at the situation in higher education, universities are increasingly taking over responsibility for urban regeneration and re-skilling from town and city councils that have had their budgets slashed through austerity. Many councils see the growth of universities as the only way to save the local economy, mistakenly believing in the myth of wealth eventually 'trickling down' to citizens.

These universities, however, have little consideration for local communities, who are being torn apart by the combined effect of vanishing public services and increased demand from an expanding temporary population. Tensions rise between residents and students, in some cases the former blaming the latter, but in most cases resentment towards the university as a whole grows, exacerbated by hollow attempts at civic engagement that only insult the intelligence of residents.

By turning outwards, beyond bread and butter issues, trade union branches can work with the community to channel this frustration into a broad-based campaign to democratise not just the universities, but also the other agents making decisions with universities on behalf of the public, such as town and city councils. In order to build such broad-based campaigns, the University and Colleges Union can work with other educational trade unions, such as NUT, civil and public sector unions, such as PCS and Unison, and through local trades union councils, to generate leverage that can be used by all individuals within their own workplaces. Broad-based campaigns generate a political virtuous circuit, in a sense.

As the Lucas Aerospace Combine discovered, in order to work collectively with other unions and

industries, it is necessary to find issues that will unite workers across such divisions. Generalising a localised alternative plan, by considering what is 'socially useful' rather than just profitable, forces workers to think beyond the immediate workplace and industry. Coming together within a community raises this process to an even higher level, with the beginning point of socially useful production building solidarity from the bottom up. The creation of a community, city or even regional level alternative plan involves nothing less than a practice of radical political economy, or, in other words, socialism.

The final piece of the puzzle is the need to create as soon as possible a national or international network of alternative plans that can sustain such a movement in the long run. We should not try and re-invent the wheel. As a person in the audience of the conference reminded everyone, co-operatives have been doing this for almost two hundred years. The Lucas Plan provides a model of how to get there, and co-operatives an excellent model for how the results of such inquiries can be institutionalised in a way that doesn't undermine the core principles of socially useful production. Secondary co-operatives also provide a model of sustaining networks that can provide financial assistance as well as political solidarity, both crucial in a hostile environment.

### **Right-populist**

The task is urgent. As both trade union speakers powerfully argued, Tony Kearns in the morning, Chris Baugh in the evening, climate change, the threat of which is intensified with the rise of right-populist leaders, has the potential to not only displace millions of people migrating for survival, but also to create a world war fought over diminishing natural resources. A paradigm shift towards socialised production for socially useful products, away from short-sighted profiteering, is the only way to prevent this bleak future. We cannot afford to wait for this to come from the top down, it must come from us. It is in this practice of democracy against overwhelming odds that the Lucas Plan gives us hope.