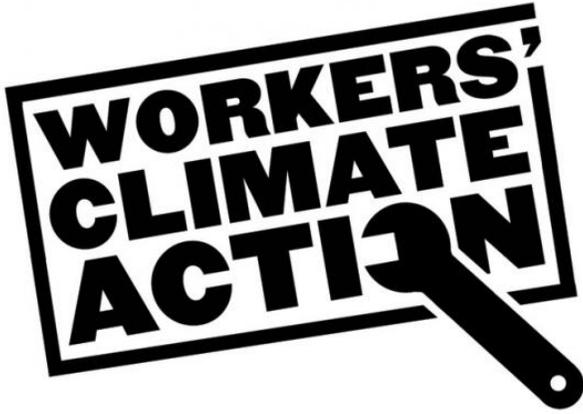


LESSONS FROM THE PAST: LUCAS AEROSPACE AND WORKERS' PLANS



During the 1970s, a large number of workplace unions and rank and file organisations in Britain produced workers' plans, to tackle unemployment, restructuring and other employers' attacks. These plans invariably questioned the logic of capitalist production for profit and asserted the need for "socially useful production" – often making explicitly pro-environment proposals.

Probably the most famous was the Lucas Aerospace Corporate Plan, published by the cross-union combine committee in 1976, which included a detailed section on alternative energy. The following summary is taken from Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott's *The Lucas plan: a new trade unionism in the making?* (1982):

"One of the basic problems facing society is the scarcity of energy resources. The recent energy crisis has brought home to many people the political and economic insecurity of our advanced technological society, resting as it does on fossil fuel energy supplies, access to which is limited. And beyond this there are absolute and finite limits to the resources that are available, and to the capacity of the ecosystem to absorb pollutants and environmental degradation without undergoing irreversible changes.

"Consequently there is a need to find not only new sources of energy but also new forms of energy use.

New, renewable, sources and more efficient methods of conversion must be developed.

Solutions to the problem based on nuclear power give rise to new problems of health, safety and even survival. Instead R&D should focus on new sources of energy and new types of energy conversion transmission and storage."

The document spelt out detailed plans for heat pumps, solar cells and fuel cells, windmills and flexible power packs, as well as a road-rail public transportation vehicle, a new hybrid power pack for motor vehicles and airships.

"The Combine sees pollution and toxic emissions from cars as a major ecological problem. It is also concerned at the expense and scarcity of fuel as further disadvantages of the traditional wasteful ways in which cars use fuels. Battery-powered vehicles are often seen as a substitute, but they have their own problems as far as normal car use is concerned. .. we propose that a hybrid system be evolved..."

According to Dave Elliott, workers in four major military contracting firms produced similar initiatives. The Vickers National Combine Committee developed proposals for alternatives to arms production – particularly marine technologies such as wave power, submersibles for undersea module collection, mining and agriculture. Workers at Hawker-Siddeley in Brough contacted the Lucas Combine concerning the possibility of diversification to fight redundancies. Discussions of alternatives to military production also took place amongst shop stewards at Rolls-Royce in Bristol, and at BAC in Preston where development of alternative products was included in wage negotiations.

Chrysler car workers also developed a similar approach, demanding diversification into public transport and agricultural vehicles. A statement from the joint delegation of Chrysler stewards and staff representatives (1976) stated:

"Consequently we believe the only fundamental approach to the protection of jobs is to demand and to achieve nationalisation of Chrysler UK without

compensation (which is in line with Chrysler Corporation's own nil valuation.

"The widespread ecological and environmental criticism of the private petrol-driven car as a socially irresponsible form of transport suggests to us that we must explore the feasibility of new kinds of products of a socially useful kind to harness the skills of the existing plant and machinery, [and direct it away from a commodity whose profitability and usefulness is rapidly declining."

The Lucas approach was also adopted by workers at Ernest Scraggs, a Manchester textile machinery manufacturer, faced with the threat of an immediate plant shutdown. Proposals included health and safety equipment (e.g. humidity and dust control apparatus) for the textile industry, as well as expansion into the field of machine tools. Trade unions at the Dunlop plant at Speke, Liverpool suggested it should switch production to a new type of bicycle, which could provide employment for more than a thousand people.

Other workers' plans also emphasised renewable and environmentally friendly technologies. *Workers Power: A socialist report on the power plant and energy industries*, produced by AUEW-TASS union at Trafford Park, Manchester and the Conference of Socialist Economists (1977) advocated wave, wind and nuclear power. It noted: "In the Severn Estuary, with its 40ft tidal range, Britain has one of the world's best sites for tidal power. An 80ft high dam or barrage across the estuary could produce 10,000MW of electrical energy. Once built, this barrage would supply this energy almost free of charge. With no fuel costs to meet, the only major cost would be the maintenance and overseeing of the equipment."

Even the Labour Party issued a document, *Sense about defence: the report of the Labour Party Defence Study Group* (1977) which contained proposals for ecologically and socially useful production.

These workers' plans indicated the ecologically progressive direction of many socialists and trade unionists in the 1970s. Had a fraction of these ideas been implemented, the fight against climate change

would have been considerably more advanced today than it is. The plans were snuffed out by the employers' offensive and the wave of austerity imposed by the Tories after Thatcher become prime minister in 1979. However they indicate the potential power of a militant working class movement to relate constructively to pressing ecological issues.

Of course there were weaknesses and limits to the plans. What was missing was a strategy to enforce the "right to useful work" which it argued for. To give real bite to the radical working class aspirations expressed in the Alternative Plans, they needed to be linked to the question of power. Workers should have demanded nationalisation without compensation of the firm, forcing the state to finance it whether it is profitable or not, and the right of workers' control over production. They should also have spent more time building rank and file organisations, both within particular employers and unions, and across different industries to embrace the whole of the labour movement. They also needed to fight politically for a workers' government.

However the Workers' Plans showed the tremendous creative power that lies in the hands of the working class, equipped with modern science and technology.

Workers' Climate Action is a direct action and solidarity network made up of socialists, anarchists and other class struggle activists involved in both the environmental and labour movements.

WCA stands for a worker-led just transition to a low-carbon economy and believes that organised labour, particularly in frontline industries such as aviation, energy and transport is a key agent which is fundamentally capable of effecting meaningful social change.

We are currently organising around these industries. If you want to get involved then get in touch.

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