

A fight for Useful Work

Lucas Aerospace

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1988

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JOBS ARE UNDER threat all over the place. It is not just ones that are useful to us; like nursing, teaching, bus drivers; that are chopped. There are also workers in plants producing weapons, nuclear power, and so on whose futures are far from secure. Workers like those making missiles in Shorts in Belfast whose jobs could well vanish if privatisation plans are put into operation.

While we don't want to see anyone tossed onto the dole we also need to question what is being produced and in whose interests, As well as fighting to save the jobs we should be bringing up this issue In the 1970s workers at the Lucas Aerospace Company in Britain set out to defeat the bosses plans to axe jobs. They Produced their own alternative "Corporate Plan" for the company's future. In doing so they attacked some of the underlying priorities of capitalism, Their proposals were radical, arguing for an end to the wasteful production of military goods and for peoples' needs to be put before the owner's profits.

MILITARY MATTERS

Lucas Aerospace in the early 70's was one of Europe's largest designers and manufacturers of aircraft systems and equipment. It had over 18,000 workers on its Payroll' spread over 15 factories, throughout Britain. Nearly half of its business was related to military matters&emdash;in product" ion of combat aircraft and the Sting Ray missile system for NATO. But it also had small interests in medical technologies.

The Company had been formed into the size it was through the take-overs and amalgamations of smaller size companies. It had been backed by the Government of the day who wanted a strong and efficient aerospace company to compete with the other European manufacturers. As part of achieving this Management planned to rationalise the whole 15 factory operation into a more integrated and streamlined company. This would mean lay-offs for at least 20% of the workforce and the closure of some areas. The prize for the owners of Lucas in doing this, would be a much greater involvement in the military markets where profit rates were very high compared with other industries.

POOR WAGES

The intentions of the Company' owners and management did not go unnoticed by the Lucas workers or their Shop Stewards Combine Committee (SSCC). The origins of the SSCC was in the strong trade union tradition at the time in Britain though particularly in the aerospace industry. Over a period of years the workers in the different unions had seen the need to co-ordinate their negotiations against a single management so as to avoid poor wage increases as one section was paid off at the expense of the others. So they formed shop stewards committees that bridged their different union memberships. As the company had grown bigger these shop steward committees from different areas also linked up, to carry on the same idea of meeting the management with a single voice for all workers in any negotiations.

STRUGGLE PAYS

The SSCC at Lucas which linked all the company sites had not, however, come about without much effort or struggle. It had grown to the importance it had because of its involvement with the direct rank and file struggles of workers there and was looked to by many far more than their individual unions or full time union officials. One of the most spectacular successes of the SSCC was in the Burnley strike in 1972 when by means of mobilising the support of all Lucas workers, a 13 week strike by Burnley workers was carried to a successful conclusion leading to a wage increase 167% larger than that nationally negotiated by the Union officials! The SSCC in the course of the strike had organised widespread collections and support meetings for the striking workers and had backed this up with strategic work stoppages at different plants that had maximised the losses to the Company with the minimum loss in pay. The support action co-ordinated by the SSCC was extremely effective and eventually saw management capitulating despite their previous claim that they wouldn't give the workers a penny extra

After the Burnley strike, the SSCC was able to achieve much better pay and conditions for all union workers at Lucas. Local disputes in the Company were often settled through sympathy action co-ordinated by the SSCC. Management was unable to break the new found unity and was fearful of any large strike, like that at Burnley, breaking out again.

USEFUL JOBS

It was against this background that the SSCC in 1976 proposed the alternative Corporate Plan to Lucas's management.

It was the product of two years planning and debate among Lucas workers. Everyone from unionised engineers, to technicians to production workers and secretaries was involved in drawing it up. It was based on detailed information on the machinery and equipment that all Lucas sites had, as well as the type of skills that were in the company. Its central aim was to head off Lucas's planned job cuts by arguing that the concentration on military goods and markets was neither the best use of resources nor in itself desirable. It argued that if Lucas was to look away from military Production it could expand into markets for "socially useful" goods where it already had some expertise and sales.

If this was done no job losses would be needed. The Plan itself did considerable market research for what was needed to replace the military goods and what Lucas could actually make. According to it Lucas could eventually wind down its military production, keeping all its present workforce. In other words no job losses at all were envisaged. Moreover the production of high technology equipment like kidney machines would be of far more benefit than Sting-Ray missiles to society. The workforce would be much more happy with this from the point of view of jobs and the quality of work.

SHUNNED BY BOSSES

Lucas's owners and management did not however place a very high value on either the provision of work or its quality. When the Plan was presented to them they shunned it. They resented

“their workers telling them what to do” and insisted on the Company’s commitment to defence production. The job cuts and rationalisations were to continue.

...AND UNION LEADERS

The full time union officials half-heartedly pledged their support for the Plan, but did nothing to widen the support among other trade unionists for it. This partly reflected their antagonism to the radical proposals of the Plan which went outside, by a long stretch, the cosy wage negotiations they were used to. But also they were antagonistic to the SSCC which they saw as getting above its station. They were worried that the influence of the SSCC and the hornets nest it was stirring about job cuts and “socially useful” production might spread beyond their control even more than it already had. Maintaining the status quo was particularly important to them also at this time because of the pact signed between the Union leaders and the Labour Party Government which was aimed at taming the demands of union members in return for more say for the Union bosses in “national policy”.

SELL OUT

The Labour Party similarly, now forming the Government, applauded the Plan but spent their time avoiding it like the plague. It reflected some of the weak politics, however, of the SSCC that they had turned to them at all. It was the British Government (with active Labour Party involvement) which in the first instance had supported Lucas’s move to a competitive military manufacturer for NATO. Like all “socialists” in Government they had promptly forgotten their commitment to help the workers movement.

DIRECT ACTION

If it was direct industrial action that had built the SSCC into what it was and gave it the confidence to produce the likes of the alternative Corporate Plan, then it would have been the same industrial action that would have carried it forward further. That such direct action by the workers was not looked to by the SSCC in the aftermath of its rejection by the Lucas bosses reflected major weaknesses. Looking to the Labour Party was a huge weakness since it presupposed that Labour really had the interests of the workers at heart, which it didn’t, The Labour Party in Government was looking after the interests of the British state. It was not going to challenge capitalism- or its values which the Lucas Plan did at root. Workers, as became clear, only had themselves to look to for help. If the SSCC looked to this they may have got somewhere.

To some this response of management’s was not very surprising. But these people were in the minority. The bulk of the SSCC while expecting an argument and some tough negotiations were totally taken aback at the response. As one AUEW shop steward put it: “Quite honestly, I thought the Company would have welcomed it... that they would see it as constructive trade unionism...”

PROFITS FIRST

Constructive it may have been if the world was being run along different lines — ones that valued peoples need for meaningful work and put social needs above military production. The Company's owners were adamant that this wasn't the way things were going to be. For them Capitalism was the order of the day and this meant profits first and foremost, Moreover it was their right to "manage,' Lucas and to decide where its resources would be used. To them the 18,000 people working at Lucas had no say in these fundamental matters and they resented the intrusion. In the aftermath of the Lucas Plan they determined to break the SSCC and its influence, which as we will see they did.

LABOUR PARTY

If the rejection of the Plan came as a surprise to the SSCC, the aftermath put them in a spot — what to do next. Previous to this when management had stalled or rejected their demands they had returned the matter to the rank and file workers where industrial action of some sort had been used to shift the Company. But this time, this did not happen. Instead the SSCC turned their attention to winning the Labour Party and the full-time Union officials to their cause. In doing this, they spent less and less time in consultation with the workforce at Lucas. The workers there who would have had the most to fight for and to gain from the Plan became less informed. Even the regular news-sheet previously produced by SSCC became more and more irregular, eventually disappearing altogether, Slowly the unity built up in previous times was whittled away as SSCC members were now spending a huge degree of time meeting Labour MPs and Ministers — neglecting the real job of maintaining their workplace organisation.

JOB CUTS

As the lobbying of Labour Party MPs and Union bosses continued, Lucas's management proceeded with the job cuts and rationalisations where they could. With the SSCC busy lobbying but not co-ordinating any action, unity weakened among the workforce. Different areas were left to fend for themselves. With this situation Management did have the upper hand and used it. Some local victories were won by workers and jobs saved. Mainly this was through industrial action of some sort to force implementation of parts of the Plan. But this situation was a poor replacement for the unity and strength of previous times. Inevitably when jobs went, activists and in particular some of the main workers behind the SSCC were victimised. Once again, as has too often happened in Britain, faith in the Labour Party was a slippery slope to being sold out and losing the fight, Lucas workers had got to where they had through their own actions and organising capacity — it was this that would have been the way forward.

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Retrieved on 9th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 29 – Autumn 1988.

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