

# The Lucas Plan and Today

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I suspect that not everyone here will have heard of Lucas Aerospace, let alone the 1976 Alternative Corporate Plan produced by the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee. It's nearly 50 years ago!

I should emphasise that, although I was living in Birmingham at the time, I don't have first-hand, or even second-hand, connection with the Plan. Much of the information I am going to pass on comes from Hilary Wainwright and David Elliot's book, *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* (Spokesman, new edition, 2018) and the web sites of the New Lucas Plan campaign (<https://lucasplan.org.uk/>) and the Lucas Aerospace Combine (<https://www.lucasaerospacecombine.co.uk/>).

Lucas Aerospace was formed in the late 1960s as the result of a government grant to Lucas to buy a number of aerospace companies. It was at the time Europe's largest designer and manufacturer of aircraft systems and equipment, including fuel systems, flying control instrumentation and electrical equipment. It had been involved with work on Concorde, the Soviet TU144 supersonic airliner, the A300B Airbus, the Lockheed Tristar, the RB211, the Anglo-French Jaguar, the European Multi-Role Combat Aircraft and the Sting Ray missile system. About 43% of its business was related to military work and 7% to other defence work. Approximately 45% of its work came from Rolls Royce and 27% directly from the Ministry of Defence.

The division employed 18,000 highly skilled manual and staff workers at 15 factories on 11 geographical sites throughout the UK. There were 12 individual manual and staff unions, represented in shop stewards' committees on the different sites, but initially no overall umbrella organisation within the grassroots trade union structures to raise issues of common interest affecting all workers, such as pensions, employment levels or investment policy. This was in contrast to management who, being organised centrally, could dictate corporate policies at will, and play off one plant against another. It was in these circumstances that in 1968 a decision was made to form a Combine Shop Stewards Committee representing all Lucas Aerospace workers.

From small beginnings, the Combine grew in strength. Between 1972 and 1975 it was involved in several campaigns, in particular a Burnley parity strike, a campaign against redundancies and a highly successful campaign around Lucas Industries' new pension scheme. That gave the Combine a strong base and expertise when it came to developing the Alternative Corporate Plan.

Following a period of expansion, in 1974 Lucas Aerospace announced the need to restructure the company as a consequence of "increased international competition and technological change brought about by the need to introduce new technology". That meant swingeing job losses. While militant defensive campaigns had had some success, the number of workers still fell, and the Combine felt that a policy on redundancy was essential.

The idea of the Combine's Alternative Corporate Plan came about as a result of a meeting held with Tony Benn at the Department of Industry in November 1974. Thirty-four Combine delegates met with Benn in an attempt to persuade him to include Lucas Aerospace in the nationalisation of the aerospace industry. Benn indicated that he did not have the power to do that; however he suggested that the Combine should draw up an alternative corporate

strategy for the company. This suggestion started a process which resulted in the Combine drawing up the Alternative Corporate Plan.

The Plan was proposed to the Company in October 1975. It involved 4 interlocking elements:

1. A documentation of the productive resources of Lucas Aerospace, including the skills of the workforce.
2. An analysis of the problems and needs facing workers in the Company as a result of changes in the aerospace industry and the world economy.
3. An assessment of the social needs which the available resources could meet.
4. Detailed proposals about the products, the production process and the employment development programme which could contribute to meeting those needs.

The underlying ethos was that if so much public money was coming into the Company, then the public should get a return out of it in meeting social needs. But they wanted to save jobs too.

Initially the Combine had approached outside organisations for suggested products. After receiving only three replies, the Combine circulated questionnaires to the workforce requesting product suggestions which answered a social need and could be produced using the workforce's existing skills and plant technology. Emphasis was also to be put on the way the products were to be made, making sure that workers were not to be deskilled in the process.

150 product ideas were put forward by the workforce. From them, products were selected to fall into five categories:

- medical equipment
- alternative energy technologies, including energy conservation
- transport vehicles
- improved braking systems
- oceanics, including 'telechiric machines' – ie machines that involve a hostile environment under remote control by an operator in a safe environment (eg now: drones).

Specific proposals in the medical sector were: an expansion of 40% in the production of kidney dialysis machines, which at that time were being manufactured on one of the Lucas Aerospace sites; artificial limb control systems; sight-substituting aids for the blind (drawing on radar technology); the development of a vehicle to give mobility to children suffering from spina bifida; and manufacture of an improved life support system for ambulances. The Combine "regarded it as scandalous that people could be dying for the want of a kidney machine when those who could be producing them are facing the prospect of redundancy".

In the energy sector, proposals included the development of heat pumps, solar cell technology, wind turbines, fuel cell technology and the development of a flexible power pack for a wide range of purposes, particularly in the Third World

In transport, the Plan proposed a new hybrid power pack for motor vehicles and road-rail vehicles. Later, the Combine produced a road-rail bus, which toured the country.

The proposals were rejected out of hand by Lucas Aerospace management, indicating they would not diversify from aerospace work, even though they had clearly indicated that it was in decline, and despite the existence of marginal industrial and medical equipment already being carried out on some of the sites, which could have been built upon. But redundancies were delayed.

The Combine's Alternative Corporate Plan received worldwide support from a multitude of organisations including those who would not normally support trade union activity. Combine shop stewards attended numerous meetings in Britain and visits abroad to Sweden, Germany, Australia and USA. In 1981, Mike Cooley, a member of the Combine, received the Right Livelihood award, the money from which he donated to the Combine. In addition, the Combine was successful in attracting funding from charitable bodies, which enabled it to set up the Centre for Alternative Industrial Systems (CAITS) at North East London Polytechnic and the Unit for the Development of Alternative Products (UDAP) at Coventry Polytechnic.

While individual trade unions and the Labour Government supported the Plan in principle, there were neither the structures in place, nor the political will, to put pressure on the management to negotiate with the Combine to implement the Plan. An opportunity was lost to make a company receiving public money accountable to the community in which it served. Now Lucas Aerospace, as a company in its own right, no longer exists, parts of it having been sold off, with other parts closed down. Like other UK-based manufacturing companies, it was a victim of poor, unaccountable management, and a sad lack of successive governments' industrial strategy. However, the Lucas Plan was a key moment in demonstrating that workers can develop coherent industrial strategies quite different from those of their employers, and that there are alternatives to military production. It was largely motivated by the threat of redundancies, but it was led by people with vision..

At Vickers plants on Tyneside and further afield the ideas of the Lucas Plan were taken up by the Vickers Combine Committee, although this was almost entirely shop-floor based, largely due to the small number of technical and design staff at each factory. This affected the type of alternative plan that the Combine committee produced. In 1975 the Defence sub-committee of the Labour Party NEC had asked the Vickers shop stewards to work with them on alternatives to the Chieftain tank. The stewards at Elswick discussed several alternatives with the subcommittee, including recycling plant, oil spillage pumps, small brewing systems and agricultural equipment for the Third World. These proposals were also used as part of the Vickers Combine's campaign against closures and redundancies – though again, without being taken up by management. And of course, Vickers is now gone, being replaced by Pearson – in turn Israeli-owned.

Shop stewards from Vickers also joined with colleagues in the local shipyards to create the Tyne Shop Stewards conference, in order to discuss, and make use of, promised new policies from the then Labour government. A meeting in 1977, addressed by members of the Lucas Aerospace Combine, aroused interest among shop stewards in the power engineering industry. At Parsons (now Siemens), stewards had just won a campaign to bring forward the Drax B power station, guaranteeing employment temporarily. To secure jobs more long-term, the stewards became particularly interested in Combined Heat and Power, working with local tenants' groups on the issue and becoming one of the mainstays of a national campaign; while stewards at Clarke Chapman in Gateshead developed a plan along the lines of the Lucas Plan.

In the same year, 1977, Newcastle Trades Council first passed a motion recognising the wider relevance of the ideas behind the Lucas Plan. Regular contact was maintained with the Combine Committee, and Parsons steward Bob Murdoch was appointed to take special

responsibility for the issues raised by the Plan. In 1978 the Trades Council and the Socialist Centre organised a series of discussions on the wider relevance of workers' plans at which several Lucas Aerospace workers spoke. That year the City Council agreed to provide finance and resources to shop stewards' committees, to carry out social audits of threatened closures and to develop alternative proposals. While this was generally too late to build up effective resistance, the issue of workers' and users' control over product decisions gained support from some public sector trade unionists too.

When the shipyards were nationalised in 1977 the Vickers yard in Barrow became part of British Shipbuilders. It comprised both shipbuilding and engineering, and up to 1970 had also had a cement division. After privatisation in 1986 as VSEL, the company took the decision to focus on its 'core' business of work with the Ministry of Defence. In 1987 the Barrow Alternative Employment Committee, as part of a campaign for alternative civil work to the construction of Trident submarines, produced 'Oceans of Work', which put forward an ambitious plan to utilise the shipbuilding and engineering skills of the workforce, with particular emphasis on wave and offshore wind power systems. The VSEL management rejected the proposals, stressing the company's military specialisms; but employment declined from 12,000 in 1987 to just over 3,000 in 1986, although it is currently about 10,000 and due to grow to 17,000. This experience has made it very difficult to win support for defence diversification among workers at the shipyard (see Maggie Mort, *Building the Trident Network*, The MIT Press, 2002, and Steven Schofield, *Oceans of Work: Arms Conversion Revisited*, British American Security Information Council, January 2007, online at [https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/oceans\\_0.pdf](https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/oceans_0.pdf)).

Yet, nearly 48 years on from the Lucas Plan, the product ideas put forward by the Combine and other groups of workers are now mainstream. On 26 November 2016 a conference was held in Birmingham to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Plan. It was sponsored by Breaking the Frame, Red Pepper, PCS, the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, the Green Party, the Million Climate Jobs Campaign, Scientists for Global Responsibility, UCU and others, including Newcastle TUC. The aim of the conference was to reopen the debate about industrial conversion and democracy, and it focused on the following topics:

- The Lucas Plan story and its relevance today
- Trident and arms conversion
- Climate change, renewable energy and transition issues
- Alternative and local community plans
- Robotics, automation and the future of work
- Practical ways to develop the Lucas Plans of the future.

Working groups in the four areas of arms conversion, just transition, robotics and automation and democratic local planning were established after the conference. On behalf of Newcastle TUC, I have been involved in the 'arms conversion/defence diversification' working group, but I took a step away from that last year on health grounds, and the working group has not met in the interim, although there are now plans to revive it.

Through the Tyne & Wear County Association of Trades Union Councils, Newcastle TUC has pursued the issue of arms conversion/defence diversification. A motion from the CATUC on 'Defence, Jobs and Diversification' was not only agreed by the 2017 Trades Union Councils Conference, but sent as the single motion from that conference to the 2017 TUC Congress, where it was also agreed, albeit with opposition from the GMB and some other unions. The

motion agreed that the 1975 Lucas Plan “was an idea from which we can learn much today” and noted that “Forty years afterwards, we are facing a convergence of crises – militarism and nuclear weapons, climate chaos, and the destruction of jobs by automation – which mean that we have to start thinking about technology as political, as the Lucas Aerospace workers did.” It called on trade unions and the TUC to lobby the Labour Party to establish “before the next general election a ‘shadow’ Defence Diversification Agency, to work closely with the Shadow Department for Industry in developing an overall national industrial strategy including the possibility of conversion of ‘defence’ capacity.” The first task of this Agency, the motion said, “would be to engage with plant representatives, trades unions representing workers in the ‘defence’ industry, and local authorities, to discuss their needs and capacities, and to listen to their ideas, so that practical plans can be drawn up for arms conversion while protecting skilled employment and pay levels.”

Newcastle TUC also donated towards the production costs of the film, ‘THE PLAN that came from the bottom up’, the short version of which was shown at the 2018 Trades Councils Annual Conference. In November 2019 the Trades Council, CATUC and the North East People’s Assembly held a successful conference at the Unite building on John Dobson Street, on ‘Engineering for Peace, Jobs and Climate Justice’. The conference focused on the four key areas already quoted: Arms Conversion/Defence Diversification, Democratic Local Planning, Just Transition/Green New Deal and Robotics & Automation, and it also included a screening of the short version of the film, THE PLAN. Plans for a follow-up, and for a screening of the full film at the Tyneside Cinema, had however to be cancelled due to the Covid pandemic. The full film was finally shown at the Star & Shadow cinema on 19 February 2022.

So where are we now, especially given last year’s TUC decision?

Although Unite has workers in the ‘defence’ industries, its delegation supported the 2017 Congress motion on the Lucas Plan. In May 2016, under Len McCluskey, the union had produced a ‘Defence Diversification Revisited’ paper which set out the objective of defending members’ jobs, while at the same time urging government funding for diversification and stating clearly that “legislation is needed to create a statutory duty on the Ministry of Defence and its suppliers to consider diversification. Without legislation, history tells us that voluntary mechanisms do not work as defence companies are unwilling to take the risk of entering new or adjacent markets.” The same paper said that defence diversification was clearly a long-term project and would do little for the workers currently engaged in projects such as the Trident submarine replacement.

It is the threat of the loss of skilled, well-paid jobs at BAE Systems in Barrow which is very much behind the GMB’s resistance to diversification, and Unite is clearly looking over its shoulder at the potential for its members to be poached by the GMB. In any case, representing members is a central issue for trade unions. At a Zoom meeting in 2021 organised by the Nuclear Education Trust, on ‘Scotland and Defence Diversification Today’, Andy Brown, Unite convenor at the Faslane submarine base, pointed out that thousands of jobs were involved with Trident and its successor programme, directly and indirectly; and that the remote location of the base meant that there was little economic justification in bringing alternative employment there. A key part of the discussion, he said, must be putting workers and communities first, and cast-iron guarantees of job security were needed.

It is fair to say that the TUC basically sat on the 2017 motion, largely because of the opposition by the GMB. And with the defeat of Labour in the December 2019 general election, the plan for a Defence Diversification Agency is no longer on the table. It may well have been one of the reasons that Labour lost the Barrow seat. And with the changed

political map, it is perhaps not surprising that in March 2021, in response to the government's integrated defence review, Unite assistant general secretary for manufacturing Steve Turner said: "The defence of the nation must be linked with the defence of our national economy and the retention of the UK's ability and freedom to operate independently, whether on land, at sea, in the air or online." This already prefigured the GMB motion at the 2022 TUC.

Yet we do know, as CND (*Trident and Jobs*, online at <https://cnduk.org/resources/trident-and-jobs/>) and the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (<https://caat.org.uk/alternatives/jobs/>) have shown, that many more jobs could be created than lost if there were a switch from weapons production, particularly Trident, to more socially useful products. In a 2007 revisiting of the 'Oceans of Work' document, Steven Schofield (see above) demonstrated that it was feasible to regenerate Barrow's economy, and diversify it away from submarine production, although there would be temporary dislocations. And he pointed out that climate change is an emergency far greater than any other we have faced.

Can promotion of the ideas of the Lucas Plan help build the movement for peace? Yes, but not alone. Such promotion is part of winning the political argument in the trade union movement, but it has to be embedded in an overall alternative economic, social, environmental and political strategy. That strategy must include: a new drive for general and comprehensive disarmament, beginning with the elimination of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction; a rejection of British imperialism and NATO; and a 'just transition', with worker involvement, not only for workers in carbon-intensive industries but for those in the defence industry too.