A RADICAL CHALLENGE

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The dilemma of revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary situation forces the movement to search for new and more advanced forms of struggle. This is nowhere more true than in the workers' movement.

The occupation/work-in pioneered at Clydeside and elsewhere, and campaigns to assert a degree of workers' control over the social consequences of their work initiated by the NSW builders' laborers, are shining examples in a generally bleak picture. The former tactic emerged out of a struggle to save jobs - a general issue which is of continuing importance as capitalism attempts to "restructure" its way out of recession.

The threat of structural unemployment was also the initial spur to a dramatic new initiative taken by the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee in the UK. Having seen their workforce cut from 18,000 to 13,000 through "rationalisation", the stewards resolved not only to fight for the right to work (which they did successfully, forcing the withdrawal of 800 redundancies in early 1974) but also to spell out to the company precisely how the workforce could be maintained.

This was presented in the stewards' Corporate Plan (CP), "a contingency strategy as a positive alternative to recession and redundancies". But the plan was much more than that. Lucas Aerospace rely largely on "defence" (i.e. war) contracts. The Corporate Plan also considered the social consequences of the firm's activities and proposed that it move into new areas of socially useful production. "There is something seriously wrong about a society which can produce a level of technology to design and build Concorde but cannot provide enough simple urban heating systems to protect the old age pensioners who are dying each winter of hypothermia." (CP).

The Lucas Combine covers 64 companies and their subsidiaries in 20 countries. In the UK, it employs 80,000 workers with an annual turnover of approximately Stg.£300,000,000. The Aerospace Division has gradually achieved predominance in its field. Indeed, "Lucas Aerospace is now the only company in the world with the capability of producing, within a single organisation, a complete range of aircraft electrical generating systems and switchgear." (CP).

The late '60s saw great turmoil in the electronics industry in the UK. Weinstock had amalgamated the giant GEC and AEI combines and by sacking 60,000 workers increased profits from £75 million to £108 million. "The lessons of the Weinstock escapade were not lost on Lucas workers .... Lucas Aerospace, if it were permitted, would embark on a similar rationalisation program." (CP).

This was the impetus for the formation of a cross-division, cross-union group of shop stewards in the Lucas Combine. The group began to campaign both to fight redundancies at the shop floor level and to obtain some control of the money in the employees' pension funds - a serious task as the two funds totalled £120 million - over three times the capitalisation value of Lucas on the stock market.
The idea that the Stewards Committee prepare an alternative corporate plan arose in late 1974 when it became clear that cutbacks in “defence” contracts would continue to threaten jobs.

Preparation of the plan was hindered by the fact that it was an attempt to project a strategy embracing 17 factories producing a diversity of products. But it was considerably aided by the nature of the Lucas workforce. By its nature, the aerospace industry employs a very high proportion of skilled engineers and technicians. Union membership embraces all workers up to and including senior engineers who, in many other industries, would be considered part of management. It has been, and will continue to be, very difficult for Lucas management to argue against design possibilities and projections drawn up by “their own” design staff. A senior engineer arguing with the strength of his own position, and backed by shop floor industrial muscle, can present a formidable opponent to management.

The plan began with a detailed questionnaire sent to stewards at each factory calling for a breakdown of the resources, human and material, which existed and for details of “any other products which your plant could design, develop and manufacture”. A total of 150 ideas were then collated under six main themes. The method of preparation of these ideas varied with each factory. At some, the matter was put directly to mass meetings of workers; at others, stewards worked out the drafting and later obtained approval from their members.

At the end of nine months, the plan was drawn up in six volumes (one for each theme), each of about 200 pages, listing in detail the new products which could be made and how it could be done.

Understandingly suspicious that management would take the more profitable aspects of the plan (which would have cost them millions of dollars to evolve “for themselves”) and ditch the socially useful, but less profitable, aspects, the stewards have kept five of the volumes secret. One - on alternative power sources - has been submitted to management. This is seen as a test case. In mid-1976 management rejected out-of-hand both the detailed scheme and the overall notion of the plan.

Management also indicated a very clear understanding of the dangers they face from rank and file organisation. Lucas Personnel Director Whitney stated “We will not go into any negotiations with the Combine (Shop Stewards) Committee as we already have established contacts with the trade unions involved”.

And so, like any other class confrontation, the issue comes down to one of power. Part of the struggle involves taking the issues to the factory level and building campaigns out into the local working class communities. At a mass meeting in Burnley, where there are two Lucas factories, overwhelming support was voted for the plan. It also revealed splits within the management. Local managers, who are as scared of losing their jobs as the workers, are becoming increasingly irritated with the central management’s obstinate refusal to consider the plan. There is considerable scope for exploitation of this break in the ranks.

At first sight, the idea of workers proposing a series of measures (whether imbibed with a social conscience or not) to “help” a company out of its troubles is a very worrying proposition. It must raise concern among Marxists from a number of points of view:

* that it will do no more than preserve unemployment within that group until the long-awaited economic upturn returns us to business as usual;
* that it will assist in fostering the illusion of a unity of interest between workers and management in much the same way that worker participation schemes do (see ALR 55-56);
* that, through the exercise of providing the bosses with a gift of free expertise in product planning and design, workers will feel an increasing tendency to offer positive suggestions for the more profitable operation of the company.

All these dangers are very real, but even the most superficial reading of the shop stewards’ publications reveals that the workers are as aware of the dangers as anyone. But before going further, it would be best to list also the positive aspects of the notion of the Corporate Plan.

* It challenges the fundamental prerogatives of management. Just as the
idea of “mere builders’ laborers” intervening in an environmental and ecological issue horrified Sydney bosses, so the concept of shop floor workers coming together to democratically discuss the goods they will produce strikes deep into the vitals of capitalist ideology.

* Because of the particular nature of Lucas Aerospace production - armaments - the workers have opened up a whole new dimension to the perennial problem of the arms race. They have shown, in a most dramatic manner, that you can’t have an arms race if the workers refuse to make the weapons of war. Since the war, British arms production has been dictated by two factors: foreign policy and the prevailing economic climate.

The moral posturings of the British Labor left have been an exercise in futility compared to these hard facts. It is true that the Corporate Plan did not originate from any revulsion at the nature of arms production - on the contrary, it stemmed from the fact that the arms were no longer in demand because the government could not afford to buy them. Nevertheless, there is now the clear possibility that the forces unleashed in the process of formulating the Corporate Plan will be such that, should the economic situation suddenly revive, and should the cold war warriors emerge from their caves, there will at least be substantial questioning within the Lucas workforce as to the possibility of industrial action to prevent a return to the arms race in the UK.

* Action can be an infectious disease. The first wage increase won by the first trade union did not persuade workers that the bosses were all nice people after all; it made them hungry for more. Forcing the bosses to change course through, if necessary, a process of confrontation, encourages workers to demand more control in more areas of work. In this respect, the Corporate Plan differs fundamentally from schemes of worker participation. “This Combine Committee is opposed to such concepts (participation) and is not prepared to share in management of means of production”. (CP).

The author discussed some of these aspects of the plan with Mike Cooley, Chairman of the Combine Shop Stewards Committee.

He displayed that combination of hard-headed realism and astounding adventure which characterises the plan. Radical technology has descended from the trendy magazines to the shop floor and, as a consequence, has become a genuinely political force. The creative abilities of the working class are being tapped, albeit at a microscopic level. But the five volumes of the plan remain locked in the safe because there is no question of trusting the management.

The Corporate Plan is not a suggestion made by participants. It is a demand - a new field of battle for the class war.

 Had the management at Lucas Aerospace been less backward and blindly hostile to the stewards’ movement, they could well have attempted to absorb through prevarication and partial acceptance. That would not have headed off the conflict. Fitters and electricians, research scientists and design engineers have devised a mechanism for articulating an alternative set of ideas to those of the company. The dispute is as old as capitalism and will last until the end of capitalism.

Nobody at Lucas Aerospace believes they are making a revolution. But they have taken a giant stride.

A crucial element has been the degree of rank and file participation in the evolution of the Corporate Plan. Workers who have been divided from one another geographically, and by barriers of different crafts and different unions, have been drawn together through the direct medium of the shop stewards. The essential strength of the Plan lies in the commitment of the rank and file to its implementation.

But the plan is no panacea. It will not solve any of the basic contradictions of capitalism. As the Plan says, “progress can only be minimal so long as our society is based on the assumption that profits come first and people come last. Thus the question is a political one”. Only time will tell whether the Lucas workers will win their struggle. But, already, their example has sparked other groups of workers to prepare their own corporate plans as alternatives to redundancy. The combination of a new range of products, selected with a view to their social utility, has been taken up by the workers at the Ernest Scragg Engineering group.