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London Report: Redundant Swords, Plowshares Needed

Suppose the company you work for manufactures products which are, at best, irrelevant to the real needs of society or, what is worse, are actively pernicious. Suppose your company depends on government military contracts and devotes much of its capital and labor force to the development of further means of destruction. Suppose you are unhappy about this state of affairs. What do you do? Resign? That may be a noble act - but for the great majority of assembly-line employees in industry, such a step, especially at present, would be both a futile effort and a desperate sacrifice. Jobs of any kind, let alone socially responsible jobs, are not easy to come by these days. The consequent dilemma confronts a substantial proportion of the working population with a classic Catch 22. It also poses an immovable roadblock on the way to more creative and constructive use of the human skills available to society.

It is therefore refreshing to report an imaginative and courageous initiative which has been nurtured on the shop-floors of one of Britain's major engineering firms. The firm in question is Lucas Aerospace, Europe's largest designer and manufacturer of aircraft systems and equipment. The aerospace industry in Britain has been languishing in the economic doldrums for some time. "Rationalization" of activities in the field has led to severe cutbacks in employment, following on mergers and shutdowns during the 1960s and early 1970s. Accordingly, Lucas workers, concerned about the wave of problems sweeping down upon them, formed a most unusual fighting unit - the Lucas Aerospace and Defence Systems Combine Shop Stewards Committee, or the Combine Committee.

In recent years, the spectacle of workers' collectives in fierce rear-guard actions against factory closures and mass sackings has become unhappily commonplace. But the Lucas Combine Committee, rather than merely digging in its heels and refusing to budge, has taken the initiative to the management, with a challenge so comprehensive that it could change the whole basis of labor-management relations,

Early in 1975, word began to circulate that something extraordinary was afoot at Lucas. Over a period of months, the Combine Committee's activities gradually began to attract attention. The *New Scientist* (July 3, 1975) featured a cover story on the outlines of the radical "Corporate Plan" being developed by the committee. More details appeared in 1975 issues of *Undercurrents*, the irreverent, hardheaded British magazine of "radical science and people's technology". At last, in late January 1976, the Corporate Plan was unveiled in depth to the press and public. It is a most impressive piece of work. Subtitled "A contingency strategy as a positive alternative to recession and redundancies," it begins by describing briefly the history and structure of Lucas Aerospace and the genesis of the Combine Committee as an important voice for the firm's 13,000 manual and staff workers. The Corporate Plan evolved as a response to the likelihood of cuts in defense spending, but it was a response not against but actually in sympathy with this aim. As the introduction to the plan declares, "These reductions we regard as both inevitable and desirable." The approach is pragmatic and realistic:

"It is not suggested in this report that Lucas Aerospace is suddenly going to cease to be deeply involved in the aerospace industry. We recognize, whether we like it or not, that the aerospace industry is going to remain a major part of the economic and technological activity of the so-called 'technologically advanced nations'. The intention is rather to suggest that alternative products should be introduced in a phased manner such that the tendency of the industry to contract would firstly be halted and then gradually reversed as Lucas Aerospace diversified into these new fields."

In a telling paragraph, the committee continues:

"The desire to work on socially useful products is one which is now widespread through large sectors of industry. The aerospace industry is a particularly glaring example of the gap which exists between that

which technology could provide and that which it actually does provide to meet the wide range of human problems we see about us. 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."

The document goes on to add:

"It is our view that these problems arise, not because of the behavior of scientists and technologists in isolation, but because of the manner in which society misuses this skill and ability. We believe, however, that scientists, engineers, and the workers in those industries have a profound responsibility to challenge the underlying assumptions of large scale industry: seek to assert their right to use their skill and ability in the interest of the community at large. *In saying that, we recognize that this is a fundamental challenge to many of the economic and ideological assumptions of our society.*"

The committee - with commendable, if unnecessary, humility - asserts that their "intentions are much more modest: namely, to make a humble start to question these assumptions and to make a small contribution to demonstrating that workers are prepared to press for the right to work on products which actually help to solve human problems rather than create them."

The committee is concerned not only with products but also with the way they are produced, from conception through final execution. Partly for this reason, and also since the plan is to be offered as a basis for negotiation with the Lucas management, only part of the plan has been published. The committee has identified six major areas in which Lucas might engage: oceanics, telechiric machines, transport systems, braking systems, alternative energy sources, and medical equipment. The published material includes the introduction to the plan, a summary of the six areas of interest, and a detailed technical section on alternative energy sources. This last section is some 200 pages in length, and, to judge from this sample, the committee has done a staggering amount of homework. The area is one with which I happen to be fairly familiar myself, and I can vouch for the thoroughness and balance of the committee's assessment of prospects.

The committee's approach to implementation of the plan includes a heavy emphasis on education, both during the transition phase and thereafter. If their own activities are any guide, they themselves already have a lot to teach their own colleagues, the Lucas management, and workers and management elsewhere. But the committee is in no way inclined to leave it at that. Convenor Mike Cooley and Secretary Ernie Scarbrow have asked me to make sure to invite comment and ideas. Anyone interested may write to: E.F. Scarbrow, 86 Mellow Lane East, Hayes, Middlesex, England (or telephone 01-848 9604). The committee has no illusions about the problems before them. But they deserve credit - and encouragement - from every sector of the community. The spark they have struck may well illuminate a whole new direction for us all.