

When workers planned production

The Lucas Aerospace plan

The south east region of the TUC recently showed a film about the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards' committee who, 35 years ago, produced a plan to make socially useful products instead of the weapons of mass destruction they made for their employer.

The Lucas shop stewards were facing mass redundancies and plant closures. But part of their campaign against the job cuts was an imaginative plan for

socially useful products which they could use their skills to design and make. Their ideas and approach inspired many workers at the time.

The film was produced 35 years ago by the independent television company ATV.

Bill Mullins, an ex-senior shop steward at Rover Solihull, reviewed it for the Socialist.

About 200 people attended the showing and the film was followed by a question and answer session with a panel of trade unionists including an ex-convenor of Ford Dagenham and Hilary Wainwright, author of *The Lucas Plan*, first published in 1981.

The film was produced for a mass TV audience but in general it treated the subject with the seriousness that it deserved. It showed the shop stewards debating among themselves about their plans to produce a range of products - from kidney dialysis machines to a rail/road vehicle that they designed in collaboration with a neighbouring polytechnic.

It also tried to show the reaction of the Lucas bosses but they refused to be filmed. Instead we heard a sound recording from the managing director, squirming as he tried to claim that that the shop stewards' plan was a non-runner.

Even now, after all this time, you can hear our 'betters' in the tone of his voice. He says "but there is no alternative" to producing what we do, ie fighter plane parts and rockets for the military.

Ahead of their time

Some of the shop stewards' ideas were far ahead of their time. For example their ideas for a hybrid car which ran on electricity as well as petrol.

The stewards' socially useful alternative products were not something thought up overnight. They were the result of four years of discussion with their members in the 13 plants that made up the Lucas Aerospace combine committee.

The film showed meetings in Burnley, Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Willesden in London. It also showed other battles against redundancies, with a meeting organised by the Liverpool trades council in 1978 against the closure of the Triumph factory in Merseyside.

What stood out to me watching the film was the efforts that the shop stewards made in trying to get sup-

port for their ideas. They met with Labour politicians and trade union officials but you could see that they did not get very far.

They got a frosty reception from Ken Gill, who later became general secretary of the trade union TASS [now part of Unite]. Maybe this was because Ken was a hard line Stalinist, while the chair of the combine committee, Mike Cooley, was a Maoist who had split from the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The stewards commented that the union officialdom demanded that they go through the official machinery ie the confederation of ship-building and engineering unions. To do this, the stewards said, would have meant their project was dead in the water from the beginning!

In the film the shop stewards explain how, at meetings with Labour government ministers, they were given the run-around and fobbed off to the ministers' underlings.

It should be said the first minister they met was Tony Benn and they received his support, but it was not long before he was replaced by Eric Varley, a right winger.

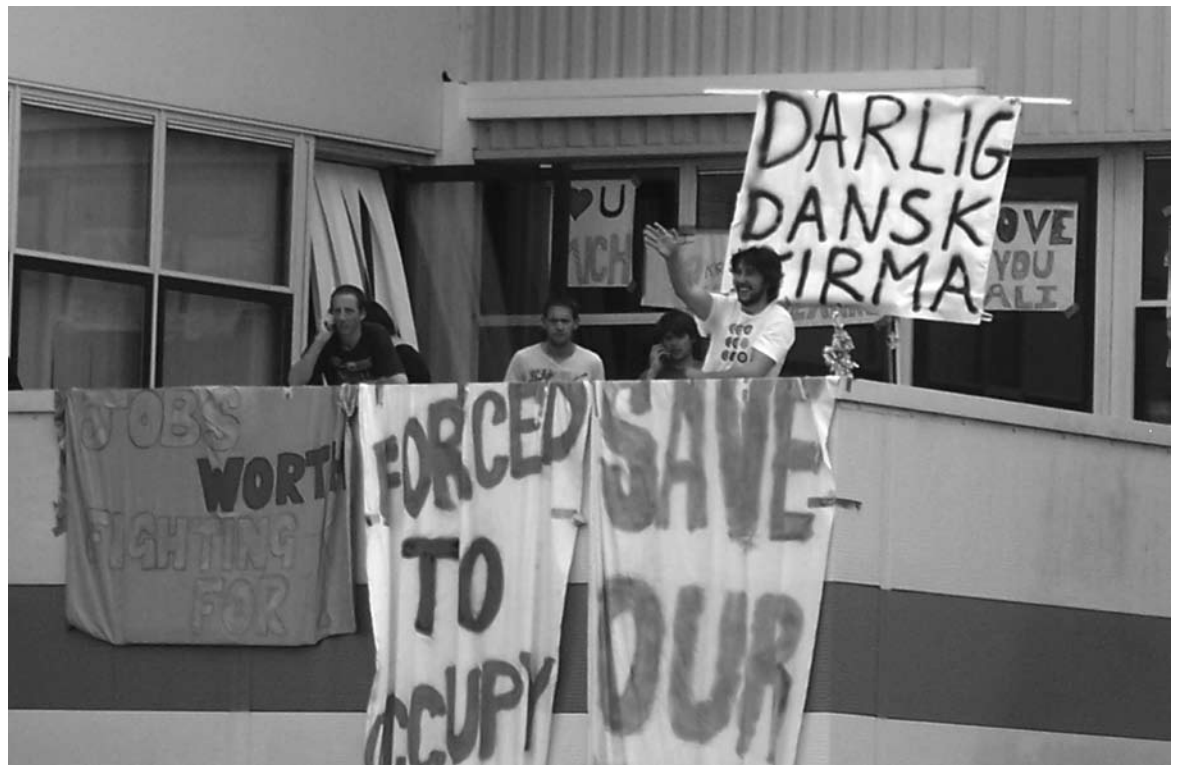
Benn had said that he did not have the political authority to force Lucas to listen to the shop stewards but would do his best.

Nationalisation

In the discussion after the screening I asked if the combine had called for Lucas Aerospace to be nationalised. I explained that this is what we did in British Leyland (BL) at about the same time. We called for BL to be put under public ownership with workers' control and management.

Hilary Wainwright, who had called the Lucas plan a "new kind of trade unionism", said that nationalisation was not enough and "hadn't worked".

The ex-Dagenham convenor disagreed, especially after a member of the audience said that you needed capitalists to invest in the first place. "Tell the National Union of Mineworkers that nationalisation didn't work, look at the health and safety of



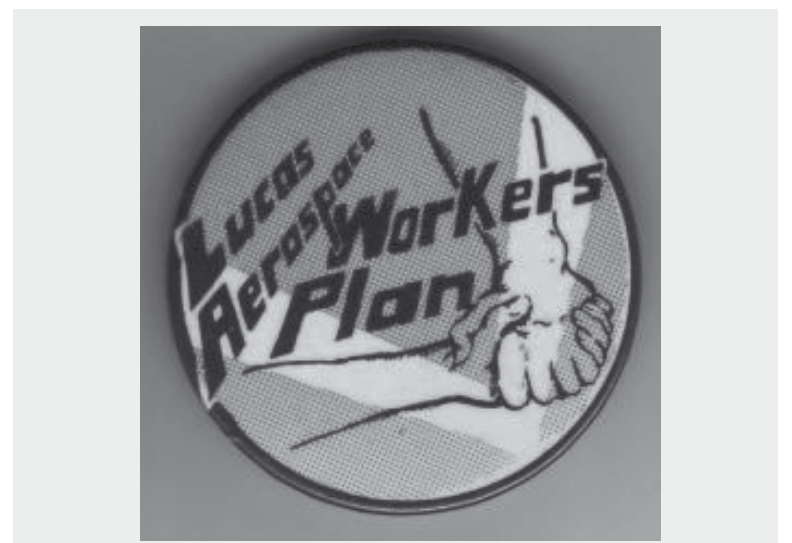
Vestas workers occupy their factory photo Senan

miners before and after nationalisation" he said to applause.

My personal view was that the Lucas combine did not put enough emphasis on the political question of who owns and controls Lucas Aerospace.

If they had, then the necessity of the nationalisation of the whole Lucas combine under workers' control would have been seen. This would have included, not just the aerospace arm, but also the motor component arm as part of a programme of nationalisation of the whole motor industry. This was something we demanded at the time of the BL crisis. The Militant pamphlet produced at around this time said it all: "no to subsidisation, yes to nationalisation of BL".

The Lucas workers' ideas resonate even more today - as was seen at the time of the Vestas factory closure on the Isle of Wight a couple of years ago. There the workers made green and socially useful products, wind



turbine blades. But the factory was still closed by the company. The Socialist Party called then for the nationalisation of the company as part of a 'green fuel' industry run under

workers' control and management. The old saying still goes: "You can't control what you don't own and you can't own without nationalisation".

Climate change and extreme weather

Pete Mason

Scotland enjoyed its warmest November on record and the UK's autumn was the second warmest since records began in 1910, the Met Office confirmed this week. Yet: "Met Office spokesman Dan Williams said the figures should not be seen as evidence of global warming" the London Metro warned. "It's very difficult to attribute anything on a regional scale to things like climate change" Williams told the BBC.

Well, perhaps, if taken in isolation. But 2011 "caps a decade that ties the record as the hottest ever measured", the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) announced in its annual report on climate trends and extreme weather events, unveiled at UN climate talks in Durban, South Africa. The WMO shows that "Thir-

teen of the warmest years recorded have occurred within the last decade and a half." (Telegraph, 3 December 2011)

After a slight slowing of the world's warming trend, 2010 boosted CO2 emissions with increased vigour. This trend has clearly continued in 2011.

In reality, the question is not whether a particular example of extreme weather - such as the mild autumn in the UK, the murderous drought in Sudan or the 12.8 million people affected by flooding in Thailand - can be attributable to climate change, but how much climate change has worsened the weather in each case.

Worldwide, global warming has made bad conditions intolerable. Food production has been affected.

Oxfam has released a new report, Extreme weather endangers food security: 2010-11: A grim foretaste

of future suffering and hunger? (28 November 2011). Extreme weather has helped to push tens of millions into hunger and poverty in a grim foretaste of a warmed world, Oxfam warns.

"Extreme weather like the droughts in Russia, China and Brazil and the flooding in Pakistan and Australia [in 2010] have contributed to a level of food price volatility we haven't seen since the oil crisis of 40 years ago." Socialists ask why food is subject to the whims of the 'free market', when it leads to famine?

The Met Office does not deny global warming or its cause in "human activity" (aka capitalism). But claiming that the extreme November temperatures in the UK are "very difficult to attribute" to climate change can be misused in the black propaganda of "Big Oil" against the science of global warming.