The Lucas Plan

An interview

2026 marks the fiftieth anniversary of 'The Lucas Plan', which mobilised a workforce to propose and produce socially useful products. In this excerpt from a longer interview Mike Cooley, a member of the Lucas Aerospace Combine, describes the ideas behind the plan and some of the many problems involved. The interviewer is David Harding.

Mike Cooley
David Harding

DH. … The Lucas Aerospace Corporate Plan focuses its attention on a particular type of product – what you have called socially useful products. To what extent though, within the Plan, do you look at and attempt to develop a strategy for, first of all, control of the production process? And secondly to what extent have you looked at the production process in terms of new technology currently being introduced and the wide implications of that technology for the nature of the labour process and for future employment?

MC. In the original Corporate Plan we made the point about the need to link hand and brain, the idea being to release all the tacit knowledge and creativity of people on the shop floor which modern Tayloristic production techniques destroy. Now we haven't been able to force a position where any of the Plan's products is mass produced in Lucas or produced in any quantities. Heat pumps have been produced only as prototypes. So therfore, there hasn't been the opportunity to test out in practice a different labour process, much as we would like to do that. We have operated a different labour process both in drawing up the Corporate Plan itself and also in making the prototypes. For example, the road/rail vehicle which is quite a complex mechanism. No ratified mathematical analysis was done for that at

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all. We used the common sense, the experience and the tacit knowledge of workers by asking them what size they thought an axle should be and we made the axle that size and in fact it worked because these people have spent a lifetime making, bending and twisting axles. We were able to democratize the whole decision making process, within the product design, the product planning and the product manufacture. So at a very small embryonic level when we were producing the prototype, we changed the nature of the labour process. Now we're putting forward a proposal to the company at the moment, in a collective bargaining framework for a new factory in the Liverpool area to produce heat pumps. We've got them running as prototypes and we have involved architectural students and others in so laying out the factory as not to reproduce the kind of hierarchy and control that exists in modern industries – to get real integration of workers by hand and by brain.

The whole question you raise has become much more significant in the last six months where the company is attempting to introduce significant pieces of new technology, computer aided design techniques, electro-chemical machining, numerically controlled machines, and so on. At the moment we're just starting to draw up a Corporate Plan on new technology where we're going to go through this same process again of involving workers in all the factories in a tremendous discussion, getting their ideas and so on. And in the meantime we're imposing a moratorium on all new technology. It yet remains to be seen how successful we'll be in doing that but at least we're raising the issue that workers should not have the new technology in until they've had a chance to analyse the consequences and begin to put forward a new proposal. I might add that in doing that we're only reflecting what the TUC in Australia has done. It's put a moratorium on all new technology for five years until it can examine the consequences.

DH. Have you at any time during your attempts to implement the Plan presented Lucas Aerospace management with an integrated formula which includes not only the 'socially useful' products but also aspects of the production process, the question of control over it?

MC. No, we haven't done that yet. We've fought initially on the basis of the socially useful products. That would be a significant breakthrough. If we could then get that we would do the second stage. But of course in our day to day working, on the conventional products, we exercise a significant amount of control over the pace at which we produce, what the rates are, and so on.

DH. Can you give us an idea – if we look at examples of socially useful products such as the heat pump, the road/rail vehicle that you've

mentioned – of the form of production process you would be arguing for in the implementation of that aspect of the Corporate Plan.

MC. Really, I think we regard management as we now know it as moribund and superfluous, just a command relationship, and what we would really like to see is a selfmanaged form of factory in the way in which we self-managed the whole production of the Corporate Plan itself or the way in which we selfmanage the Combine Committee with all its finances, its newspaper, and everything else. We feel that it would be wrong to leave the final decisions on what parts are produced in factories and how they're produced to those locked into the factory situation. We think it's vitally important that they should be reflecting the needs of the communities in which they're based. Rut we're by no means clear how that element is going to be brought in. We've attempted quite unsuccessfully now, on five occasions, to get discussions going in communities about how factories should be run and how they could be involved in it.

DH. What you've just said implies a radical challenge not just to the 'function of management' but to the whole structure of social relations within the company, the whole question of who controls what in a capitalist framework. Does that not produce a fundamental reaction from a company such as Lucas Aerospace, from any company enmeshed in capitalist relations of production?

MC. Yes, sure. It's been absolutely hostile. There is one development going on when one talks about the reaction of management. It would be true to say that at the level of management which represents finance capital, that level has been absolutely hostile. These are the people deciding whether they will invest in Brazil or South Korea or elsewhere. But at the level of management which represents industrial capital, people who like to see things made and produced and so on, as distinct from fiddling with paper money, we found a very receptive audience amongst those kind of people many of whom incidentally would lose their job if the factories were closed down in any case. So I wouldn't want to generalize too much about management as a whole, I'd have to draw the distinction between technical management and division managers, often closely linked into communities, where the kids are at school, where the factories are and who would themselves be in serious difficulties if there were closures.

DH. To what extent do you feel the need to look for a new strategy now around the Corporate Plan and its implementation? You've talked earlier about having gone through all the hoops, about the move by the company

now to introduce a whole wave of new technology with serious consequences for both jobs and the labour process, and you've now outlined above the radically different nature of the production process you would ideally like to see. How do you then see your strategy in the next year?

MC. One avenue that some people see is identifying some products and then campaigning for new factories to be built to produce them. That would be one area. I don't think that is going to take us very far because the company will try to exercise ownership over the products and so on. I don't see any point in being involved with the government much longer, either the present one or the one we had previously. At present, there is brewing a major confrontation between workers and Lucas management over on whose terms new technology will be introduced.

DH. That will be a defensive struggle but one with links to the approach to production processes which is in the Corporate Plan?

MC. Yes, and it will be offensive to the extent that we've got very clear views about how new technology might be used. For example, the telechiric devices which were mentioned in the original Corporate Plan, devices that mimic in real time the motions of a worker going through a skilled labour process but do not objectivize the human skill or diminish the human being. So we won't just be saying you can't have this in the new technology unless you pay so much. We don't see it in narrow economic terms. We will be proposing ourselves alternative means of production which we would like to see introduced. So it will, as you say, on the one hand be defensive but on the other hand we will be also attacking from the other side in proposing our own forms of new technology. But I don't think we will be able to do much more in isolation. We can only move forward if other combines develop in other companies.

DH. Many of the products you've put forward in the context of the Lucas Corporate Plan relate to areas such as health and public transport. One of the aims of the Combine Committee is to break with a narrow economistic view of the union struggle or with its location in particular plants. What has been your experience in working with, and organizing with, workers in other sectors?

MC. In the case of designing factories like the heat pump factory we've been able to work with architects and architectural students and so on. But I think the most fruitful field so far has been with the public service unions and with the health service unions. We've had meetings with a medical panel we've

set up where doctors, nurses, auxiliary workers in hospitals, all work together in an integrated team where they can identify requirements in the health services and we can very often quickly find technological solutions to those. The only barrier is an economic one or a political one or something else. So that has worked fairly well but it's still at a very embryonic stage because unfortunately there is still an enormous division between people as producers, that is their life in factories and their life in the communities.

In the case of the public services unions, they have been inviting us to their weekend schools, we've had a whole series of speakers at conferences they've organised to talk about ways of fighting the cutbacks and linking in directly. But again that is still at a very embryonic stage: the Corporate Plan has only been going for about four years in its present form and it takes a long, long time to change political attitudes and organizational ways of behaving, particularly with traditional hierarchical ways of doing things that you often get in Labour or left movements. We've been trying to form new organizations as we've made new links; it's inevitably been a fairly slow process.

DH. Do you see, in the future, yourselves linking in with say health workers in a struggle over implementation of Corporate Plans on Lucas? How would you see that sort of joint struggle operating?

MC. We hope that we can make far greater use and far greater involvement with trades councils. In our view that's a completely underestimated form of trade union organization so we're putting a lot of emphasis on that at the moment. And we would like to see a situation where, for example, if a hospital is being closed down for lack of equipment, the health workers in that hospital would come to local factories and say 'this is the hospital where you and your family will have to go if they're ill,' and that the local factories should be involved in direct action with them, including strike action, to maintain those hospitals and if necessary appropriating part of their time and maybe equipment in those factories, waste materials or whatever, to produce machines or equipment which the hospital workers need.

DH. Do you have any experience to date, in Lucas factories where the Combine Committee is active, of workers taking action outside the factory in these wider struggles?

MC. Oh yes. There was a meeting in Burnley, a town hall meeting, where 300 people came along from the community to define community needs and so on. There were long discussions about that and the Lucas workers have been helping them for example to improve housing, conserve energy and materials. In some of the local struggles around hospitals our shop

stewards have played a leading role with nurses and others in their area. So all that is developing, though quite slowly.

DH. Do you see the need to develop structures that go beyond those that exist at this moment, such as the trades councils you mentioned, to meet these wider struggles? It seems to me that historically, and I'm not sure that this is necessarily so, trades councils have always been very wary of taking an active role in cross union struggles. Certainly as they are constituted at the moment trades councils have shown themselves very weak precisely in the sort of area of struggle you've been talking about.

MC. I think in some ways that's a reflection of attitudes within the individual unions which make up the trades councils. Unions are very very possessive of their own patch and they are deeply ridden with economism. And that economism grew stronger at a time when Britain was a great imperialist nation, where the metropolitan working class could probably screw a bit more out of the metropolitan ruling class – although I'm not suggesting that the British working class were ever 'living it up'. But they didn't have to be as political as the workforce in other nations. Also I think in many ways the political dynamism was sapped by social democratic ideas through the Labour Party and elsewhere or if it was encouraged it was often by small left wing groups, the CP or those others who behaved in a very, very arrogant way towards the working class; instructing them what to do, telling them how to go about it and so on.

So I do see the need for new structures. I'm by no means clear what type of structures they should be. Clearly they will have to be political to transcend the narrow economism of the trade unions but I hope that they can avoid all these mistakes that were made in the past, these terrible mistakes about the role of leadership and so on. We've seen in developing the Corporate Plan and all that has flowed from that the importance of leadership being more catalytic and enabling, where you keep your most dynamic elements at the base rather than sending them up into the superstructure; where the base is always correcting and purifying the superstructure, rather than a small elite taking things over at the top. So yes, I see the need for new structures but if it is to be a political organisation it must involve masses of people and its political ideas should be put over in a catalytic way rather than an authoritarian way.

DH. I want to look at a final area of discussion. We now have a new Conservative government whose industrial policy is radical in a very right-wing sense, and could prove to be one of the most reactionary we've seen for a long time. To me it would seem that the climate created by this

government and its policies is a very negative one for implementation of Corporate Plans in a factory faced with closure or threat of redundancies. Two or three years ago under the Labour government there was at least always that possibility of state intervention to give a certain room for manoeuvre – time and money for restructuring, reorganizing, to produce new products, within a Plan structure. In the present political situation the state clearly has no intention of offering that sort of room for manoeuvre. Does that not make for a much bleaker outlook for the Corporate Plan strategy in the next few years?

Can I ask you also more generally about what you see as the basic relationship between the Corporate Plan movement and the state. Do you see it, if not as a necessity, than at least an advantage, something to work for, to have a state structure which operates in a reformist way, and will intervene directly, financially, to offer a certain room for manoeuvre to firms in crisis that could facilitate implementation of Corporate Plans? You said earlier that you had exhausted governments, wanted nothing more to do with them. Would you still hold to that if, for example, there were a left reformist government in power in England?

MC. Well firstly, as far as the present government is concerned certainly, outwardly, it's very aggressive towards the trade union movement. It's still difficult to know to what extent they differ in any substantial way from the last government in relation to their attitude to big companies. The other government had certainly a softer approach when there were redundancies and so on, but it was still governed by market forces, and our experience under the Labour government was they never gave us any direct support. There was a lot of sympathy but it always ended short of actual help. There were pious statements in the House of Commons and so on, and I detect that the Thatcher government is still in many ways planning industry in an indicative sort of way. They haven't got rid of the NEB in spite of all the political assertions that they would do so. They're still making massive funds available for research and development, so they're not leaving it to free market forces. And the whole tendency internationally is to have the state intervening. Now I can see the need for a state that is sympathetic but the real danger is that that would be the kind of state that existed in Sweden say for 40 years where workers, in my view, are absolutely passive, where when there's a problem they always look for the next representative to deal with it for them, where they're incorporated into the thinking of the government and they always see the solutions as within the framework of government. I think we're looking for something far more democratic and outgoing although we recognize that there must be a state which reflects that. But we don't for example believe that if large sections of British industry were nationalized in

the way that the Bennites and others suggest that would necessarily make it more socialistic. We believe very much in what James Connolly once said that if nationalization alone meant socialization, the hangman would be a socialist because the hangman is nationalised as well. We need a very different state structure to make that sort of thing possible and I don't see a future Labour government doing that very well. For example we have always recognized the need for the state to intervene in medical care and we think it was a very, very important development in Britain that a Labour government took medical care to a large extent outside the framework of market forces. This was profoundly important. We feel there are whole other areas, including parts of manufacturing industry where the main concern should be the use value of products rather than their exchange value and that was what was significant about the National Health Service.

So certainly we support that kind of development but in practice the dangers have been that in implying that they were going to do that with large sections of British industry and restructuring it the last Labour government succeeded in conning the trade union movement and its leadership in particular into accepting 1.5 million people out of work. Now had that been done under a Conservative government I'm sure there would have been an outrage. I can recall 15 years ago people saying that there would be a confrontation between the government and the unions if we ever got half a million people out of work. We've now got 1.5 million and it was the Labour government that was able to con people into that. So whilst I'm not taking a sectarian view and saying that we don't welcome intervention, I'm trying to make the point that intervention by the state itself, even under a Labour government, won't get the kind of thing we want. It's going to require radically different policies and in my view those policies will only ever be fought through and sustained and supported if masses of people at the factory level and the community level are involved in ensuring that they're implemented in their interests. And that they're part of the process, rather than a small elite, even a left wing elite in the Labour government, doing it by proxy on their behalf.