

## Comment

When Mr. Arnold Weinstock in the sixties, with the enthusiastic support of the Labour Government, rationalised the GEC he increased its profits by thirty two million pounds and sacked sixty thousand workers. He was highly praised at the time for the efficiency and white heat of this essay in technology. It meant, of course, that instead of sixty thousand people living by the productive work they did in GEC they were supported out of taxes while they produced nothing. Mr. Weinstock's profits thus came in part from a tax on working people. This not unusual story ought to warn us of the danger of turning adverbs and verbs into abstract nouns and depriving them of their contexts; after a bit we forget that the contexts are all-important. Efficiency, for example, becomes a kind of virtue even though Lt. Calley efficiently slaughtered the people of My Lai, the Russian tanks efficiently put an end to socialism in Czechoslovakia and the CIA did a similarly efficient job in Chile. Productivity is another local god, so sacred that we don't bother to ask what is being produced, and profitability is another, we scarcely ask for whom it is profitable. Defence? Who is being defended against whom? Religion is a prime example: it is vaguely felt to be a good (or bad) thing regardless of what people are being religious about; as though it doesn't matter what God we worship so long as we are on our knees, as though advocacy of (or an attack on), say, the Caste system or clerical domination of schools were the same kind of thing as advocacy of (or an attack on) the Eucharist or the Sermon on the Mount.

But now for the good news: an indirect effect of Mr. Weinstock's manoeuvres was the formation of a group of people splendidly dedicated to asking questions like: What? and For whom? In the course of the reorganisation, part of GEC came into the hands of Lucas Companies and the working people there saw quite clearly what the future was supposed to hold for them. Similar rationalisations were to be expected especially as the market for Lucas's products was due to shrink. Lucas, particularly in their Aerospace division, make instruments for killing people, and Mr. Roy Mason (before he moved from Defence at Westminster to attack in Northern Ireland) warned that "there would be a marked reduction....in the level of activity in military aerospace projects." Under the pressure of the obvious threat to their jobs the workers formed an inter-Union organisation, the Combine Shop Stewards Committee, an institution growing out of the Trade Union structure and not seen as any kind of rival or alternative to traditional organisations. What distinguishes this Committee is its clear recognition that "the traditional method of fighting for the right to work has not been particularly successful." They are driven by the sheer pressure of events to ask more radical questions: What work, and for whom?

No dialectical skill can make it positively attractive to the working class to oppose cuts in Defence expenditure; workers increasingly realise that all national wars, whoever they are for, are always against them. Yet in the terms set by our present society,

the choice for many workers is between unemployment or co-operating in the killing business. The Combine Committee proposes in a particular field to change the terms.

Their response is what they call the Corporate Plan "an attempt to transcend the narrow economism that has characterised trade union activity in the past and extend our demands to questioning the products on which we work and the way in which we work on them." This is no mere call for 'worker participation in management': "The Committee is opposed to such concepts and is not prepared to share in the management of means of production and the production of products which they find abhorrent..... There can be no 'industrial democracy' until there is a real shift in power to the workers themselves."

In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII remarked that while from factories material comes out ennobled, men come out degraded; the Committee sees that increasingly only the second part of this is true, the rest is the Pope's victorian optimism. "The process oddly known as 'Scientific Management' " they say, "attempts to reduce the worker to a blind unthinking appendage to the machine " but this is not unconnected with the kind of dehumanising product the machine is making. "All of this, it seems to us, arises because the motive force behind industries of this kind is the maximisation of profit."

The Corporate Plan shows in detail how the skills and resources available in Lucas, instead of rotting in dole queues, can be used to enhance life instead of destroying it. "There is something seriously wrong with a society which can produce a level of technology to design and build Concorde but cannot provide enough simple urban heating systems to protect old age pensioners who are dying each winter of hypothermia." (We killed off nearly a thousand that way in the last, exceptionally mild, winter).

One hundred and fifty projects have been worked out in great detail by research scientists and technologists but only twelve of them have been published in outline. "The greatest care must be taken to ensure that the Company does not draw off the 'money-spinners' from the Plan while declining those products which would be socially useful....the correct procedure would be to present only part of the Plan and to test out in practice how the Company will deal with it."

There is no space here to detail the twelve selected projects: they range from a new diesel-electric car, that saves 50% on fuel and has an automatic radar-controlled safety braking system, to kidney-machines – all this combined with a detailed plan for the necessary technical re-training instead of redundancy.

"Our intentions" say the Committee are "to make a humble start to question the underlying assumptions of large-scale industry 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."

Good luck and a very Happy Christmas indeed to the comrades at Lucas Aerospace.

H.McC.