

CONFERENCE REPORT

‘Engineering for Peace, Jobs and Climate Justice’



Conference organised by
Tyne & Wear County Association of Trades Union Councils
Newcastle Trades Union Council
North East People’s Assembly

at the Unite Building, John Dobson St, Newcastle

Saturday 9 November 2019



AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME?

THIS CONFERENCE in 2019 was inspired by the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards' Combine's Alternative Corporate Plan of 1976, which was a pioneering effort by workers at that arms company to retain jobs by proposing alternative, socially-useful applications of the company's technology and their own skills. A number of the alternatives concerned energy conservation – very topical today – and common threads were that technology should serve working people rather than dominate them, and that workers themselves should have a say in the direction their industry was going.

Today, we are facing a convergence of crises: militarism and nuclear weapons, climate chaos, austerity and the destruction of jobs by automation. Yet production still follows the dictates of the market, not of social need or environmental protection.

We have to change not just what we produce, but how we produce it, and to think politically about technology. It's in our hands: we have to show that alternatives are possible and achievable.

The conference was opened by Tyne & Wear CATUC president **Dave Allan** (see cover), and was attended by altogether 40 people, despite the context of the then recently declared general election, and the impact of floods on cross-country travel. High points were the screening of the short version of the film, *The Plan that came from the bottom up*, and the address by former Lucas steward **John Routley**.

Plenary speakers, in addition to **John Routley**, were:

North of Tyne Mayor **Jamie Driscoll**

TUC Northern Regional secretary **Beth Farhat**

Tam Kirby, Unite Scotland apprentices' convenor and Fife People's Assembly chair

Ronagh Craddock, Unison regional lead on climate change

Hilary Wainwright, co-editor of *Red Pepper* and co-author of the book about the Lucas Plan.

In addition **Chi Onwurah**, Labour candidate in Newcastle Central, broke off her election campaigning to address the conference in her role as Shadow Minister for Industrial Strategy, Science and Innovation.

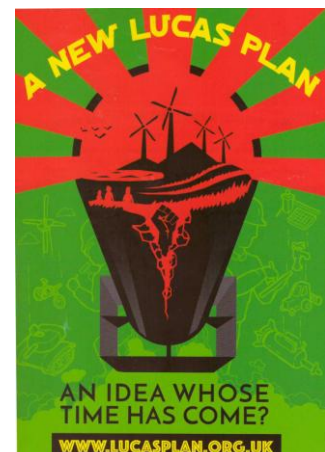
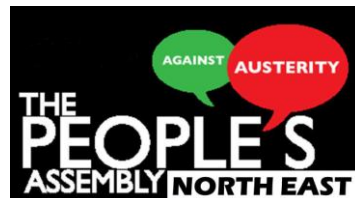
The conference was made possible by TUC Trades Union Councils development grants and by a generous donation and hospitality from Unite North East, Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Committee.

A summary of the speakers' contributions and some of the workshops follows. Notes were taken by Martin Levy and Tony Dowling, who apologise if any errors have been made.

Feedback from speakers and participants was very positive, making this conference a local starting point for future campaigning.



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Published on behalf of Tyne & Wear CATUC, Newcastle TUC and the North East People's Assembly
by Martin Levy, CATUC secretary, 13 Shoreham Court, Newcastle upon Tyne NE3 2XG

PLENARY PRESENTATIONS

Jamie Driscoll

Jamie said that his remit as elected Mayor of the North of Tyne Combined Authority includes “economic regeneration”. In the remit, business is mentioned 32 times, low-carbon once, and trades unions and co-operatives not at all.

The problem we have is the neoliberal/capitalist economic model. But neoliberalism and ‘trickle-down’ economics have failed; so-called ‘inclusive growth’ equals inclusive poverty.

Environmental, social and economic stability are linked. Making electric cars does not solve social problems. Low pay is paid for by VAT and taxes – and pollution. The school strikes have the correct slogan: “System change, not climate change”.

Capitalism is about the objective of businesses to make money. The Lucas Plan was about making useful things. In ‘free markets’, businesses operate how they like. But the objective of production should be socially useful: that needs legislation.

The economy needs to be democratised, and that is not an easy thing to do. It needs co-operation matched with a different ownership model. As Mayor, Jamie cannot change the economic model; but he can set up local good examples. He is working with Beth Farhat to set up a Teachers’ Supply Agency as a co-op.

We are without doubt facing a climate emergency: we need to limit the global temperature rise over pre-industrial times to 1.5°C, and we are already at 1.1°C. The consequences are already dramatic: fires in the Arctic cover a bigger area than the entire area of the North of Tyne. There are also massive fires in Brazil. A warmer world will actually have a detrimental impact on crop production. Civilisation as we know it under threat. People will move due to climate changes, leading to a massive increase in the number of refugees

We need to change our priorities. Houses should be built out of engineered timber, and we need a massive shift from private to public transport. The £2bn spent annually on private cars in Tyneside could fund public transport wherever people want it.

“I am here to change the rules,” Jamie said, calling on people to join the movement to deliver practical policies



Beth Farhat

On behalf of the TUC, Beth sits on the Environmental Justice Commission of the Institute of Public Policy Research. She said that the move to decarbonising the economy has the potential to provide employment opportunities across the UK. Carbon capture and storage is a key issue. But at present well-paid jobs are under attack across the economy.

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that we need to decarbonise our economy. Local authorities are declaring ‘climate emergencies’. The TUC agreed to support the student climate strikes. But we need real plans and policy to manage the transition.

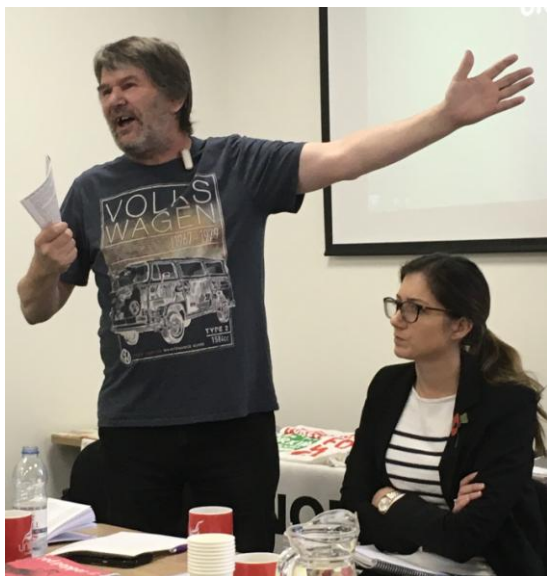
The North East had the world’s first industrial working class, and Beth’s own family has a history of coalmining. Our engineering industry and skills were built on energy use from coal. But the mines were the first sacrificial victims of deindustrialisation. We can’t allow that sort of thing to happen again.

The TUC wants to see a ‘Just Transition’ to a low-carbon world by 2050. In July 2019 it launched its ‘Just Transition’ report, and took it round the country to get feedback. The TUC recommended:



- The need for a clearly-funded path to a low-carbon economy; there should be a cross-party Parliamentary commission.
- The workers most affected have got to have a central voice – the most obvious way is through trades unions. We are looking for companies to make ‘Just Transition’ agreements with trades unions.
- Workers need skills and experience to help employers to transition. That in turn means education and training, and funding provided for it.
- All new jobs must be good jobs, with no loss of pay or worsened conditions.

Tam Kirby



Tam spoke of his native Fife as a microcosm of the issues being faced: there is the Rosyth dockyard, and companies like Raytheon and BAe Systems. Production of renewables, rather than weapons of mass destruction, is highly pertinent.

However, he said, speaking as chair of Fife Trades Union Council, it is an uphill struggle to get these issues discussed in a number of unions. Unite, for example, has policy of opposing Trident – but not if jobs are lost. The GMB focuses only on the issue of jobs.

Robotics and automation do not scare Tam. Who owns and controls the technology is the key. Unite has a brilliant document on the issue.

There may be good motions, but the number of them doesn't matter – it's what you do with them that is important. For example, Unite sits on the Scottish government's Fair Work commission, but business participation is optional: companies that need to sign up don't do so.

Likewise the Scottish government has a brilliant Just Transition policy, but the reality falls well short. We have mothballed yards while turbines for wind farms in Fife are being made in Indonesia. The work has been contracted and then subcontracted. This isn't 'Just Transition'. Thousands of jobs were promised, but where are they? The SNP government is letting the free market run our renewable energy – just like the Tories.

The political will to make Just Transition real has to be there. Trades unions need to be kicked by their own members; we need to put pressure within our own movement.

Stop talking, let's DO something!

Ronagh Craddock

Ronagh started by saying that she had been involved in youth climate work. She reported that 100 companies were responsible for the major emissions of CO₂, with 20 of those companies accounting for more than one third of the total.

The Tories are subsidising fossil-fuel companies; UNISON's view is that there has to be a collective solution, a Green New Deal PLUS Just Transition. This needs workers' control, and a World War-type mobilisation.

Over half population back decarbonisation. UNISON is campaigning for a start now, and for example for divesting pension funds from fossil fuel companies.

She stressed the need to spend money now on transforming our systems – otherwise there will be a huge bill to pay later down the line. The current devastating floods in Yorkshire and the Midland were an example of that.



Hilary Wainwright



Hilary, co-author with Dave Elliott of the 1982 book *the Lucas Plan: A new trade unionism in the making?* (new edition published 2018 by Spokesman Books), explained that her involvement with the Lucas Combine developed from an approach by the Combine to the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) for research assistance under the SSRC's Open Door Scheme – a scheme designed to give industrial, trade union and community groups access to academic research facilities. In 1980 she began work as a full-time research fellow on several problems which the Lucas Plan was facing, and visited all the Lucas Plan sites, talked with all the shop stewards' committees and attended Combine meetings. The writing of the book grew out of this.

She remarked that the workers, spurred on by threatened redundancies, had developed alternatives, and that designers, particularly at Lucas Aerospace, had the skills to design alternative products.

After Lucas, Hilary worked on ideas of social usefulness/fairness with stewards at both Vickers' tank factory and Parsons Engineering in Newcastle. Tank builders found they could make other things and Parsons workers talked about their own skills base, putting forward alternative plans for power generation.

It is amazing how the issues have come back, she said. We need a Labour government but we need people taking action now. There has to be real pressure from below, inspiring people to take action on what is needed under a Labour government. Once in government, Labour will face massive pressure from the other side to destroy its programme.

The trade union movement is very much weaker now than at the time of the Lucas Plan. It is on the defensive, and so with less confidence about alternatives, but nonetheless these are key.

Chi Onwurah

Chi, who is an engineer by education and training, said that politics and engineering make the world better. There is no better example of that than the Labour Party conference's vote for net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

Nothing is achievable until someone has the ambition to achieve it. The labour government must back that ambition, and target it with the creation of thousands of green jobs.

Our history is about making and building things. We started the industrial process of putting carbon into the atmosphere. There is a huge opportunity for engineers in combating climate change.

The inspiration of green technology can draw in a new generation: what could be more caring than saving the planet.

Labour's industrial strategy is the creation of an "innovation nation". And that cannot just be the preserve of universities. Total research & development expenditure in the UK is 1.7% of gross domestic product; Labour wants to raise it to 3%.

We must aim for the highest proportion of skilled jobs in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, developing automation to create skilled jobs and leaving 'boring' jobs to machines.

Labour's National Investment Bank will move the centre of gravity further north, with regional investment banks. The green industrial revolution also means investing in public transport that people rely on.

The Lucas Plan motto was "human-centred socially useful production". We need to build the economy we want rather than leaving it to the market or to global conglomerates. We can't afford to lose more manufacturing jobs – we must build a strategic engineering facility.



The green industrial revolution is also about living in peace across the world. The transition must be based on the skills we have now. A labour government can take control of the narrative, but change starts when people take ownership of the kind of future we want.

John Routley

John, a former electrician at Lucas Aerospace in Birmingham, and one of the youngest shop stewards at the time of the Plan, introduced the short version of the film *The Plan that came from the bottom up*. He explained that the Combine's ability to involve Lucas workers in the Plan was based on the credibility it had gained earlier in fighting on the company's pension scheme, where they managed to get two lay representatives elected to the pensions trust.

The Plan wasn't aimed at public ownership, but at avoiding redundancy. In fact, the Combine members had seen that, when other industries were nationalised, there was a continuous pattern of redundancies. Tony Benn as Industry Secretary advised the Combine to make a plan, but they didn't know how; when they went to academics they only got 3 replies.

The Plan wasn't just product ideas but a whole plant approach. It involved a skills audit. The Combine's call for ideas of alternative products released an enormous amount of initiative and creativity, with 150 ideas, many of which came out of problems in society or in the workers' own lives.

Some of the ideas, like alternative energy and transport technologies, are very relevant today. An electric/hybrid vehicle was one of the proposals in the Plan. If a Labour government implemented such proposals now, the energy saving would be much greater, and jobs could be created – very few large wind turbines in operation in this country were actually made here.

The challenge of being in a union is bringing things together. We don't have the right to say, 'Don't make those products', but we do have the right to say we can help bring about change. One of the functions of a union is to protect jobs, and we need to find the way to change things collectively, to bring about 'economic conversion'.

Lucas management poured scorn on the ideas of the Plan. But jobs can be converted when you have the political will. Thatcher's attack on the miners was a political decision. We can make political decisions that go the other way.

Ultimately, the stewards were sacked by the company because the Combine was being successful in defending members' interests. It was forcing managers to manage, and was so powerful that there was no need for union officials. We need the leadership of the trade union movement to come on board.

John's contribution was followed by a screening of the short version (30 mins) of the film, *The Plan that came from the bottom up*, several stills from which are shown at the end of this report. This short version can be streamed or downloaded from <http://theplandocumentary.com/download/>. The complete version (Part 1, 120 mins; Part 2, 90 mins), is due to be screened at a number of venues, including Newcastle's Tyneside Cinema, from the beginning of March 2020.



WORKSHOPS

Four lively workshops, based on the themes of the New Lucas Plan campaign, followed.

Democratic Local Planning

This workshop was led by **Anya Cook** of the North East People's Assembly. It was the busiest workshop, providing for lively debate and useful feedback including repurposing Tyne dockyards, cooperative energy and housing models, land ownership, pros and cons of creative enterprise



zones, consultation models, compulsory requisition, building social values into rejuvenation of shopping areas

In opening up, Anya noted that the Lucas Plan set out a plan for human-centred, socially useful production within one organisation, but this approach can be used to produce plans for new jobs for one local area, or upscaled to city or regional scale, including plans for climate jobs.

Anya reported her experience of living on a small social housing area in Bath, where residents were invited to planning meetings with developers who said they were going to improve the estate. But then nothing happened: people were ignored, let down and left behind.

In 2019, Sage, the international software company, announced they were moving their global head office from Newcastle's Great Park and relocating to a business park in North Tyneside. Great Park was planned around the Sage investment. Now, not only will Newcastle lose millions from the move, but the community will be affected, with the negative impact on local shops, Friday night food vans, and the community centre café.

When Newcastle City Council was planning its parks and green spaces be moved to a Trust model of delivery, Anya was chairing Newcastle Parks Forum. She attended a meeting led by Social Finance, a London-based outfit undertaking financial planning activity. They mooted suggestions of how and where income could be generated, in particular suggesting entering a relationship between St James Park, the football ground and Leazes Park, the park next to it. Anya objected strongly: back in the 1990s the football club wanted to buy huge tracts of this city centre park to build a training ground; and that instigated a backlash, pulling the local community together to protect and develop the park with millions in Lottery funding. There is strong community buy-in to retain the park for the people as its Victorian benefactor had intended; but you would only know all this if you had local knowledge. You can't get that 300 miles away joining dots on a spreadsheet.

To implement plans based on democratic decision-making we need more involvement of people at local levels. Residents, workers, trade unions, stakeholders, small business, education, local organisations, young people, older people need to be engaged, included and actively involved in local planning if it is to be properly democratised. Equality impact assessments too, must be included to ensure the interests of protected groups have a voice at the table. There needs to be a mechanism to mediate and negotiate different positions, accounting for different needs and interests without negating those of others. Consultation, planning, financials, budgets, possible outcomes, delivery models and targets must all be shared openly.

Transparency is an absolute necessity. The Lucas blueprint generates excitement because so much could be possible; but excitement and possibility mean nothing without trust – it's key to unlocking the potential to generate change, for the better. Democratising local decision-making to the community builds values and value into the creation of a more equitable, more equal society.

Anya posed the following questions to kickstart discussion:

- How can we influence economic development in the places where we live?
- How can communities, workers, businesses and councils work together?
- How can we decentralise economic power and ownership?
- How can we create and support the types of work that meet society's needs?"

Arms Conversion/Defence Diversification

This workshop was led by **Tam Kirby** and **John Routley**.

Tam started with a couple of questions: what will we do if peace breaks out? What will you do if Trident is cancelled? How do we fight against BAe throwing money at Pride?

We have to put up an alternative to take on management's argument.

There is a lot of work to do before we can get to the 'big society' – education and training are needed. People have to have time and energy – they don't have that when they are working 8-hour days or zero-hours jobs.

In Fife, the whole local economy depends on the defence industry. Every conversion activity has to be modelled around that. The big fight in Fife at the moment is for local jobs in the BiFab (wind farm) industry.

John conceded that at Lucas Aerospace there would not have been a plan for alternative production had there not been a threat of redundancies. But he also said that, to go into battle for alternative production, there has to be credibility from the shop stewards' committee down to the workers. A militant workforce has to be developed, and there needs to be collaboration between trades unions and direct action. Asked who owned the ideas of the Lucas Plan, and whether the Combine had patents, he replied that the Combine put forward a proposal for a diversification

committee with management, but this was rejected; ultimately there was a couple of patents taken out through the North East London Polytechnic and the Greater London Council.

Just Transition/Green New Deal

This workshop was led by **Calvin Lawson**, from North East Labour for a Green New Deal, with input from **Abel Harvie-Clark**, from the UK Schools Climate Network. There was a general discussion about what a Green New Deal could mean for the North East including:

- nationalisation, electrification and extension of public transport;
- investment in education;
- investment in wind farms;
- tree planting and rewilding; and
- job creation.

Robotics & Automation

This workshop was opened by **Ciaran Pinkney**, USDAW North East Area Organiser. He spoke about the loss of jobs, due to automated pallet moves, and self-service checkouts in shops – although there is panic when the tills go wrong, and theft has gone up a lot since automation came in. Home delivery drivers are now being subjected to a tracking system. USDAW is campaigning for:

- The legal right to collective consultation over the introduction of new technology.
- Sustained investment for apprentices of jobs affected by automation.

Tam Kirby reported that Unite has produced a paper on robotics & automation. Also, Amazon is investing heavily in robotics; workers in social care are being tracked; and algorithms are now being used to screen job applicants. The big question is: 'Who controls the means of production?'

THE PLAN that came from the BOTTOM UP

