

THE LUCAS PLAN: A NEW TRADE UNIONISM IN THE MAKING?

Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott

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**THE UNEQUAL STRUGGLE?
BRITISH SOCIALISM AND THE
CAPITALIST ENTERPRISE**

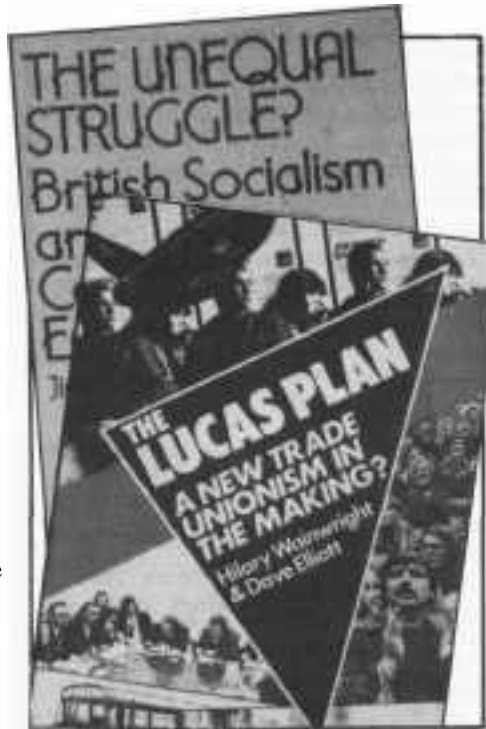
Jim Tomlinson

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These two books provide a timely introduction to socialist assessments of the economic and political character of the modern business enterprise. In *The Lucas Plan* Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott chart the rise (and fall?) of the Lucas Combine's attempt to develop what are termed 'socially useful' products as a response to the management's plans to rationalise their UK operations. These plans would inevitably have led to widespread and rapid redundancies. Jim Tomlinson is concerned with a somewhat wider project. *The Unequal Struggle?* sets out to appraise the general attitudes adopted by socialist writers (in the UK mainly) towards the capitalist enterprise. These have been generally hostile and dismissive, he argues, and in the final chapter Tomlinson draws on his critique of the way the capitalist enterprise has been conceptualised to press for a more 'open' approach towards the possible development of socialist objectives within these.

Whilst *The Lucas Plan* sets up the analysis very much in terms of a rather traditional 'them and us' or 'management and worker' framework, *The Unequal Struggle?* is more subtle — seeing the capitalist enterprise as a *locus* in which competing and diverse tendencies and directions of initiative can co-exist. Of course it is partly unfair to compare these two books as though they were addressing the same concerns in the same way. One is a very detailed account of a particular company over a difficult but limited period of time whilst the other is about theoretical concerns and forms of conceptualisation of the capitalist enterprise in a general manner.

By any view the Lucas Plan was a fascinating and enterprising attempt by the employees of the company to preserve their jobs. The struggles to develop their alternative ideas, to test some of these with prototypes, and to win realistic support for at least the possibility of producing them provides an important lesson and chapter in recent trade union history and makes for entertaining as well as instructive reading.



But there are some real weaknesses with the approach that this book adopts. Perhaps the most obvious of these concerns the assessment offered of the conditions of possibility of this kind of initiative really getting off the ground, and the more general implications that can be drawn from this particular attempt.

In the absence of a nationally agreed industrial strategy it would seem unlikely that the range of products developed in the Combine Plan could be successfully produced and marketed, let alone this kind of plan forming the basis or inspiration for similar ones to be developed in other large industrial enterprises in the UK. This is not an argument against the trade unionists pressing their case but only for seeing this as inevitably limited in its possibility of success as a means of preserving jobs. In a way the plan was *too* ambitious rather than not being ambitious enough.

Secondly, the whole idea of 'socially useful' production remains relatively unexplored in the book. The Lucas Combine pressed for the substitution of arms production with the production of such things as combined road-rail vehicles, cheap domestic space heaters, advanced medical technology and the like. All of these are clearly 'useful' but the question this raises is how far would it have been possible for this substitution to be pushed given the demand characteristics of the economy as a whole and the expenditure patterns of the nationalised transport undertakings and the NHS in particular? The fact that this range of products was technically feasible and

'socially useful' is no argument that they would provide a financially and economically viable series of products. To press the argument further for a moment, we need to question whether armament production is as socially wasteful as tends to be made out. Clearly this is *one* of the UK's most successful industries measured in terms of international competitiveness and in the absence of a benign international situation or a general pacifist stance, quite a socially useful one at that, it might be argued. What is socially (or socialistically?) non-useful about wanting to defend one's national integrity as best one can? As it stands the authors of *The Lucas Plan*, along with the majority of the Lucas shop stewards it would seem, adopt a somewhat moralistic attitude towards what is socially useful or not, mirroring the more general Left hostility towards arms production.

A further, interesting area discussed, in both books in this case, concerns workers' democracy in its various forms. What is clear, as Tomlinson argues in *The Unequal Struggle?*, is that the emphasis given to the *size* of enterprises is perhaps more pertinent in respect to effective democracy and accountability than it is with respect to traditional socialist worries about big business and monopoly market power. To organise effective internal democratic control of firms and enterprises and develop meaningful strategies of accountability might form the central argument for smaller enterprises rather than the supposed market abuse of large firms. One of the major problems confronting the Lucas Combine was the organisation of effective discussion and consultation across what was a geographically and economically disparate group of plants that made up the Lucas Group of companies. Large sections of British industry are typified by this kind of structure which seems to make little technical or productive sense. Such a structure is a legacy of the merger boom of the 1960s and the 1970s which was conducted largely for financial rather than for economic reasons. Faced with this and other constraints on the economy, it is probably the case that a very much more modest approach to what can be done within and through the capitalist enterprise needs to be adopted by socialists along the lines suggested in Tomlinson's book. Whilst both books are correctly hesitant about the adequacy of traditional nationalisation as a socialist objective, fresh approaches also need to be developed which do not uncritically endorse or fetishise 'workers' initiatives' either.

Grahame Thompson