



McLoughlin, K. (2017). Socially useful production in the defence industry: the Lucas Aerospace combine committee and the Labour government, 1974–1979. *Contemporary British History*, 31(4), 524-545. [Volume 31, 2017 - Issue 4]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1401470>

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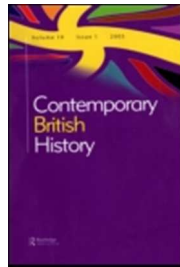
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**Socially Useful Production in the Defence Industry: The Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee and the Labour Government, 1974-79**

Journal:	<i>Contemporary British History</i>
Manuscript ID	FCBH-2016-0021.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	Political History, Labour History, Political Economy, Defence Industry, 1970s Britain

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# Socially Useful Production in the Defence Industry: The Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee and the Labour Government, 1974-79

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*In the late 1960s, a workers' movement at Lucas Aerospace was formed and proposed alternative products other than military production. Reacting to some 5,000 redundancies in the company across its thirteen sites nationally, a 'combine' committee of shop-stewards and workers accused the company management of lobbying for defence orders ahead of civilian manufacturing. Despite acclaim for the combine from the left-wing of the Labour Party and the disarmament movement, the 1974-79 Labour Government did not favour the workers' proposals and referred the combine to the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. Behind the scenes, Labour ministers at the Department of Industry felt that the combine would upset the balance of the defence industry, which was at that time an important contributor to employment and the balance of payments, as well as Britain's military role in the Cold War.*

*Keywords: Lucas Aerospace, Defence Industry, Labour Party, Trade Unions, Cold War*

## Introduction

Britain witnessed a long series of industrial crises throughout manufacturing in the 1970s. The decade was blighted by company bankruptcies, increased unemployment, intense competition from markets overseas and trade union pay-claim disputes that felled the Conservative Government in 1974 and the Labour Government in 1979.<sup>1</sup> However, the focus upon industrial policy in the 1970s has neglected to make the link between the defence industry and that of Britain's Cold War role, with a few important exceptions.<sup>2</sup> Britain's international role relied heavily on procuring armaments from domestic manufacturers, providing a major employment base in the process.<sup>3</sup> A fresh historical focus on the British defence industry in the Cold War has emerged in the last decade, recovering Britain's significance as a military power, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the defence industry and the state.<sup>4</sup> This reassessment of Britain's defence economy has provided a new framework for a new examination of industrial relations in the 1970s.

Stemming from a climate of economic crises throughout the decade, public expenditure came in for significant scrutiny from both within and outside government. The political economy of government policy came under unprecedented examination by the British academic and political left during this decade, with a focus towards defence expenditure and foreign policy. The left asserted that since the Second World War the political establishment pursued a defence role that had wasted Britain's scientific and technological resources. There was a considerable critique from the left

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3 from the mid-1970s into the 1980s, including sophisticated alternate defence policies  
4 based around reduced spending.<sup>5</sup> Central to these critiques were analyses of the  
5 defence industry, which had been previously unexamined by a left-wing movement  
6 which had focused primarily on nuclear disarmament in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>6</sup> By the  
7 1970s, the left saw the defence industry as having the potential to be ‘converted’ to  
8 production for social use, such as healthcare and affordable transport. ‘Industrial  
9 conversion’ and ‘socially useful production’ entered the lexicon of the wider British  
10 left in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the academic authors of these critiques were in the  
11 main untrained in engineering or scientific disciplines and could not offer alternatives  
12 to defence production that had been tried and tested on the factory floor.

13  
14 This situation was changed by the arrival of the Lucas Aerospace Shop  
15 Stewards Combine Committee that came to the attention of the Labour Party and the  
16 wider left in the mid-1970s. Composed of mechanical engineers and led by politically  
17 motivated left-wing shop stewards, the Lucas combine sought to convert its company  
18 to socially useful production. The combine met with Tony Benn, the Labour industry  
19 minister, and published its alternative plan in 1975.<sup>7</sup> Yet despite its left-wing  
20 inclinations, the combine was deeply suspicious of the Labour Government due to  
21 Labour’s industrial policies in the 1960s which the Lucas workers blamed for having  
22 contributed to causing redundancies in the company in the 1960s. The left-wing of the  
23 Labour Party, which was especially critical of the 1974-79 Labour Government, held  
24 up the combine as the best example of how industrial conversion could be achieved.<sup>8</sup>  
25 Nonetheless, the combine operated independently of the Labour Party, and formed its  
26 own conclusions on how military industry enjoyed a close relationship with the state.  
27 Although having not achieved its ambitions, the Lucas combine had revealed the  
28 protectionist tendencies of the Labour Government when it came to the defence  
29 industry.

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31  
32 While the case of Lucas Aerospace has been recognised in both contemporary  
33 and historical accounts, its significance in regards to the defence industry has not been  
34 significantly analysed. David Edgerton has argued that the combine missed the impact  
35 of the ‘warfare state a critical moment’ in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> This was due to the attention of  
36 the combine being overtly towards ousting the Lucas management and revolutionising  
37 the role of the shop-floor within industry. Contributing to disarmament in the Cold  
38 War, though an aim of the combine, was secondary to that of achieving control of  
39 industrial production. The threat of Cold War military-industrial complexes was only  
40 more fully grasped after the combine had run its course in the late 1970s, and was  
41 more clearly articulated by social scientists who wrote accounts of the combine than  
42 by the workers themselves.<sup>10</sup> This article will therefore place the Lucas combine  
43 within the context of the British Cold War defence industry. The correspondence the  
44 combine received from Labour ministers, together with declassified files from within  
45 the government, revealed the extent to which the defence industry was prioritised as  
46 indispensable political capital and a source of employment and technological  
47 development. This article will detail the origin of the Lucas combine, before  
48 accounting for the reaction it faced from the triad of the company management,  
49 Labour Government, and trade unions.

### 52 53 **Origins of the ‘Lucas Plan’**

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55 Lucas Aerospace was a significant player in British aircraft manufacturing, and could  
56 claim to be Europe’s largest designer and manufacturer of aircraft systems and  
57 equipment.<sup>11</sup> Roughly half of the company’s turnover came from engine fuel systems  
58 that offered the aircraft industry the largest available range of aerospace engine  
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3 equipment available from a single firm.<sup>12</sup> Lucas provided equipment to the major  
4 defence-aerospace companies in Britain, including British Aerospace Corporation  
5 (BAC), Ferranti and Rolls-Royce. Approximately half of the company's output was in  
6 the defence sector, with an estimated 43% in military aircraft and a further 7% in  
7 other defence industries.<sup>13</sup> The value of military production to the company prompted  
8 the formation of 'Lucas Defence Systems' in 1973 to focus on military equipment  
9 specifically, which included electrical equipment for Britain's Main-Battle Tank in  
10 the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Lucas was also involved with the international Multi-Role Combat  
11 Aircraft (MRCA) that was shared by Britain, West Germany and Italy, as well as the  
12 Anglo-French Jaguar civilian aircraft. On the civil side, the company had a close  
13 working relationship played an active role in the supersonic aircraft, Concorde, and  
14 the Russian TU-144.

15  
16 Despite its high standing in the industry, Lucas Aerospace was not immune  
17 from the crises in the British aerospace industry, specifically the cancellation of the  
18 British TSR-2 (Tactical Strike Reconnaissance) military aircraft in 1965 and the  
19 collapse of Rolls-Royce in 1971. The TSR-2 aircraft was cancelled by the Labour  
20 Government in 1965 on the basis that it did not offer enough potential on the export  
21 market.<sup>15</sup> The cost of the TSR-2 had soared beyond initial estimates, as the  
22 development had been initiated by the Conservative Government in the late 1950s to  
23 replace the Vulcan bomber force. The officially commissioned history of the  
24 company, *Lucas: The First Hundred Years*, was critical of the cancellation by the  
25 Labour Government in 1965, and claimed that ending the TSR-2 'halved the aircraft  
26 industry at one blow' in Britain.<sup>16</sup> The official history of the company, published in  
27 1978, was favourable towards the defence industry, and argued that 'TSR-2 [had] put  
28 Lucas into a whole new field of business for airframe and technology, much of which  
29 withered on the vine' after the project's cancellation.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, despite the  
30 setback of TSR-2, the company management remained dedicated to defence  
31 production into the 1970s.

32  
33 The decision to remain a defence manufacturer at this point was one of the key  
34 reasons why workers in the company formed a combine committee. Formed in the  
35 late 1960s, before gaining momentum in the mid-1970s, the Lucas combine's  
36 experience was examined in a comprehensive paperback published in 1982, *Lucas: A  
37 New Trade Unionism in the Making?*, authored by social scientists Hillary  
38 Wainwright and Dave Elliot. Amidst escalating job losses in industry and rising Cold  
39 War tensions, Wainwright and Elliot opened their account by stating that the 'two  
40 main threats to society' in the early 1980s were 'unemployment and war'.<sup>18</sup> The  
41 authors argued that the combine's example of peaceful production for social utility  
42 could avert both fears simultaneously. The text included comprehensive insights from  
43 combine members who recollected each stage in the experience, from formulating the  
44 plan until its eventual defeat when the management and Labour Government refused  
45 to support it. The tone of the book was often bitter towards the 1974-79 Labour  
46 Government which passed the combine over to unsympathetic trade unions.

47  
48 The acrimonious relations between the combine and the 1974-79 Labour  
49 Government had its roots in Labour's policies in the previous decade. Over the course  
50 of the late 1960s, Labour implemented a policy of 'rationalization', or concentration  
51 of successful firms into larger conglomerates.<sup>19</sup> The Government's actions were  
52 deeply resented by Lucas employees, especially those Labour-voting workers who  
53 had held out hope of the modernising reforms that was pledged by the Party's 'white  
54 heat of the scientific revolution'.<sup>20</sup> The laying-off of 5,000 workers from 1970-5 was  
55 attributed to Labour's 1960s rationalisation policy, both by the combine and Lucas  
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3 Aerospace's official history. A decade later, when considering its own origins, the  
4 Lucas combine argued that it was 'as much the child of Harold Wilson as it was of  
5 Lucas Aerospace itself'.<sup>21</sup> This was a critical point, for it explained how the  
6 combine's scepticism of the 1974-79 Labour Government's plans to bring the  
7 aerospace industry into public ownership. By the early 1970s the aerospace industry  
8 continued to face serious problems. This was seen especially in the Rolls-Royce  
9 bankruptcy crisis, which in turn had a rapid impact on Lucas Aerospace.<sup>22</sup> The official  
10 history noted how the company 'had to cut back their workforce in the aircraft  
11 factories from 18,000 to 15,000', before claiming that 'all those being made redundant  
12 were fairly treated'.<sup>23</sup> This account was later criticised by the combine as having made  
13 both rationalisation and the Rolls Royce crisis sound 'remarkably effortless and  
14 painless'.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Lucas Aerospace workers recalled their experience of how  
15 'almost overnight', two thousand Lucas workers in Birmingham, Liverpool, and  
16 Wolverhampton lost their jobs. The numbers of workers employed in aerospace had  
17 reduced by the 1970s from 283,000 to 190,000, with further losses predicted.<sup>25</sup> It was  
18 felt that the traditional method of trade union agitation against management had failed  
19 to secure stable employment and that a new departure was needed from the workers  
20 themselves.  
21

22  
23 The first initial meetings of the combine occurred in 1969, with increasing  
24 frequency into the early 1970s. The combine consisted of representative shop  
25 stewards from each of Lucas' thirteen nationwide sites, which together formed an  
26 executive council which met quarterly, initially at Wortley Hall in Sheffield.<sup>26</sup> While  
27 the combine was eager to foster as much workers' participation as possible, it was  
28 clear that several figures were becoming prominent in giving both intellectual  
29 inspiration and leadership to the workers' campaign. Mike Cooley and Eric Scarbrow,  
30 two shop stewards and former British Communist Party members based at the Lucas  
31 site at Willesden, occupied the key posts of secretary and chairman respectively, and  
32 it was they who provided the main link to the Labour Party and the wider left.<sup>27</sup> The  
33 key ambition of the combine was to change both the company's means of production  
34 and to decide what products would be manufactured instead. Cutting loose from  
35 public ownership would, the combine argued, 'reduce the nagging insecurity' that  
36 'overshadowed the industry for years', and instead give the workforce a 'real sense of  
37 direction and purpose'.<sup>28</sup>  
38

39  
40 Another key aim alongside self-sufficiency was disarmament. Both of  
41 Labour's 1974 General Election manifestos sought to reduce defence spending, and  
42 the Lucas combine welcomed this development, even if it threatened projects that  
43 their company was involved in. Instead, the proposed cuts in defence expenditure  
44 reinforced the combine's desire for peaceful production, with such spending  
45 reductions thought as being 'both inevitable and desirable' and that it was the  
46 'national policy of almost all the unions in the combine committee that there should  
47 be cuts in defence expenditure'.<sup>29</sup> The joint threat of unemployment and war, the  
48 combine contended, was commonly thought to 'be beyond the remit of ordinary  
49 workers'. The perception existed that 'technological and market pressures' were  
50 producing the constant threat of redundancy, and with it the parallel concern that 'the  
51 momentum of the military machine [was] carrying with it the threat of  
52 extermination'.<sup>30</sup> A company heavily reliant on defence contracts, such as Lucas  
53 Aerospace, was seen by the combine as being liable to political vicissitudes, catering  
54 to continually more advanced military technology.<sup>31</sup> This had been the case for TSR-2  
55 in the 1960s as it had been for the Tornado in the 1970s. Anxious over tumultuous  
56 employment conditions, the workers at Lucas demonstrated 'in a most practical way  
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3 how people without any official power might reverse both the drive towards  
4 militarism and the growth of unemployment'.<sup>32</sup>

5 The combine stepped up its activism when Labour returned to Government in  
6 February 1974. Meetings had been more frequent from 1972-3, and had created the  
7 first drafts of what would form the combine's plan for alternative production. The first  
8 success of the combine was its meeting with Labour's industry secretary, Tony Benn,  
9 in November 1974. A meeting had been requested with the minister, with the combine  
10 hoping that the left-wing technocrat Benn would enable 'the skill and ability' of the  
11 workers to be properly synchronised for the benefit of the community as a whole', but  
12 not like the 'appalling examples of the past' where industry was left in the hands of  
13 'bungling autocrats'.<sup>33</sup> Speaking on behalf of the combine, Ernie Scarbrow claimed  
14 that the workers were open to the idea of Labour's proposals, but only if members  
15 could 'utilise their skills in the interests of the community'.<sup>34</sup> Benn, who had  
16 previously shown support for other campaigns for workers' control, enthusiastically  
17 agreed to the meeting and assured the combine 'that full provision would be made for  
18 measures to extend industrial democracy'.<sup>35</sup>

19 A deputation of some thirty-three combine members met Benn in his  
20 ministerial office, with some already sensing the 'irritation of senior civil servants and  
21 some national trade union officials' at them being allowed inside the Department of  
22 Industry.<sup>36</sup> This 'irritation' was symptomatic of how exceptional the minister's views  
23 were by contrast to the civil service and the rest of the Labour Government. Benn,  
24 who had been Minister for Technology from 1966-70 when Labour was last in power,  
25 had been greatly impressed by the movement for workers' control when Labour was  
26 in opposition from 1970-4. He roused support for the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in  
27 1972 when the workers there organised a 'work-in' to maintain production even after  
28 the company had announced it could no longer afford to pay most its staff.<sup>37</sup> Having  
29 largely centrist views in the 1960s he then moved further to the left, advocating a  
30 significant increase in public ownership and opposing both the Common Market and  
31 the nuclear deterrent. By comparison, his two ministers of state, Gerald Kaufman and  
32 Eric Varley, were less than impressed by his 'hobby-horse of unviable workers' co-  
33 operatives'.<sup>38</sup> In his 1980 account, *How to be a Minister*, Kaufman mocked Benn who  
34 'with very little knowledge or experience of working-class life, was so enchanted with  
35 the very idea of shop stewards that he saw groups of them at his Departmental  
36 headquarters whenever they asked to see him and was even rumoured to have a  
37 special room set aside for them'.<sup>39</sup>

38 This was precisely the case in Benn's meeting with the Lucas combine in his  
39 offices in Victoria Street in November 1974. The Labour minister was evidently  
40 impressed by what he saw as 'a pioneering combine' and 'hoped that that the  
41 development would become much more widely known and repeated throughout  
42 industry'.<sup>40</sup> He issued further encouragement to the combine, citing that within public  
43 ownership [Labour] will be aiming to ensure that those who work in the industry can  
44 play a vital part in controlling their own destiny'.<sup>41</sup> In the meeting Benn was evidently  
45 in favour of industrial conversion, remarking in light of the disruption to employment  
46 that could be caused by defence cuts, industry 'should be thinking of ways of  
47 producing our way through a slump... and be prepared to diversify'.<sup>42</sup> In his diary  
48 entry, Benn noted the impressive nature of the plans drawn up by the combine. 'In the  
49 afternoon', he recalled, 'I went to one of the most inspiring meetings I have ever  
50 attended, the best organised combine in the country with all the unions represented...  
51 they are in fact a complete shadow administration of a very important kind... I found  
52 myself wholly in sympathy with them'.<sup>43</sup> Later, when the combine launched its formal  
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3 plan in January 1976, he noted that 'they have launched their corporate plan which I  
4 had encouraged them to do... I was very impressed... by God they have produced  
5 some excellent stuff - it just shows what the shop floor is capable of'.<sup>44</sup>

6  
7 Despite the enthusiasm from Labour's industry secretary, the shop-stewards  
8 and workers in the combine remained sceptical of Labour's plans to nationalise the  
9 aerospace industry. A meeting of the combine's leadership in January 1975 prompted  
10 moving towards workers' control of industry instead of a reliance on state  
11 intervention. The response from the Lucas workers was to organise quarterly meetings  
12 which reviewed ideas from each of its thirteen factories across Britain. Each site was  
13 represented by a shop steward who presented ideas to the combine's leadership.<sup>45</sup>  
14 Members of the combine questioned the assumption of military production upon  
15 which Lucas Aerospace had long relied as a profitable output. Phil Asquith, a Lucas  
16 Aerospace shop steward and member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament  
17 (CND), spoke for many when he claimed 'we were not going to be lobbying for more  
18 military orders like some of us had done in the past'.<sup>46</sup> Alternative production was  
19 motivated by a resistance towards armaments production. This was prompted the  
20 climate of competition that favoured cost-effective standardisation. The result was  
21 frustration for the Lucas engineers. This was exhibited in two ways: first that  
22 innovative projects would be turned down by management; and secondly, that if  
23 projects became more elaborate, the contribution of the worker became 'more  
24 restricted, more fragmented and less satisfying'.<sup>47</sup>

25  
26 In January 1976, the combine unveiled their proposals 'to a crowded press  
27 conference in the upstairs room of a Fleet Street pub' in London.<sup>48</sup> It was the  
28 culmination of several months of drafting, incorporating suggestions from workers,  
29 and it consisted of some 200 pages of material, with 150 alternative products drawn  
30 up by shop-stewards and workers. The content of the plan was later viewed as a  
31 change of direction, representing 'a shift away from a total reliance on the  
32 government' towards 'unilateral development of a detailed worker-generated  
33 corporate plan'.<sup>49</sup> It was felt that 'this level of self reliance meant that the [combine]  
34 committee was able to develop much more adventurous and technically sophisticated  
35 proposals which were suited to their strategic needs' and demanded 'the right to work  
36 on socially useful and needed technologies'.<sup>50</sup> This encompassed two underlying  
37 aims: firstly to 'protect members' right to work in the event of further cutbacks in the  
38 aerospace industry' and secondly 'to ensure that among the products proposed, there  
39 would be a number that would be socially useful to the company at large'.<sup>51</sup> This  
40 ambition was reflected in the alternative products that were suggested. In healthcare,  
41 design teams had exhibited a proto-type for the 'hobcart' mobility vehicle for children  
42 with spina bifida; dialysis machines for kidney operations; and a 'heat-pump', which  
43 worked along the same principles as a refrigerator, which supplied heat in an energy-  
44 efficient manner. In the sphere of infrastructure, there was the road-rail hybrid vehicle  
45 - a bus that was enabled to also drive on railways.

46  
47 The combine was evidently anti-militaristic and hinged their proposals on the  
48 instability of the armaments market and the defence cuts planned by the Labour  
49 Government. These cuts were regarded by the combine's plan as being both  
50 'inevitable and desirable'.<sup>52</sup> The combine tapped into the broader uncertainty  
51 regarding the Labour Government's spending plans in which wide-ranging cuts were  
52 predicted over a whole range of social services. The combine argued that 'in order to  
53 make its austerity measures somewhat acceptable, the government will at least have to  
54 make a gesture towards cuts in defence expenditure'.<sup>53</sup> It went further to reference the  
55 Labour defence secretary Roy Mason, who had announced in the Commons his  
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3 prediction that from the government there would be 'a marked reduction over the next  
4 decade in the level of activity in military aerospace projects, particularly on the design  
5 side'.<sup>54</sup> Recent memory from the 1960s was plagued by the traumas of cancelled  
6 defence projects and the ensuing unemployment that followed, and the combine  
7 forecasted more uncertainty to come. For the next three years, this issue of the virtue  
8 of military industry was a key point of contention between the combine and its  
9 detractors in the Lucas management, the trade unions and the Labour Government.

### 12 13 **The reaction from the Lucas Aerospace management**

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15 As the combine drew up their proposals during 1975, the Lucas Aerospace  
16 management exhibited no signs of departing from defence production. In the  
17 company's 1975 annual report, turnover was described as 'disappointing' and was  
18 explained by low output in some sectors and 'some grave industrial disputes' - a  
19 reference to industrial action in Lucas Aerospace at Burnley and Willesden.<sup>55</sup> Despite  
20 the unimpressive turnover, a 'substantial improvement in results' was expected and  
21 this was attributed in no small part to sustaining a presence in the military sector. It  
22 was felt that the defence reductions would 'not immediately affect business, but future  
23 programmes' with military orders forecasted to 'contribute some £200m to Lucas  
24 Aerospace over the next decade'. Export potential was also perceived in other projects  
25 in the Defence Review, including the Jaguar, Hawk and Sea Harrier. It was evident  
26 that relations between the management and some workers were already tense before  
27 the combine set about its campaign for industrial conversion. In a final statement in  
28 the company's report, the management contended with reference to industrial  
29 disputes, that 'the real success of the business can only occur with the co-operation of  
30 all concerned'.<sup>56</sup>

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33 The wording of the combine's plan, in particular the desirability of the defence  
34 cuts, was met with a sharp response of the Lucas Aerospace management three  
35 months later. Resisting the combine's arguments about the Labour Government's  
36 reductions in defence expenditure, the Lucas management remarked that 'the recent  
37 defence cuts had not affected Lucas Aerospace to any great extent'.<sup>57</sup> There was  
38 something to be said of this judgement by the management, given that the Labour  
39 Government's Defence Review had planned a gradual phased reduction of some  
40 10,000 workers in the aerospace industry (or 4% of the total in the UK) over the  
41 course of 1975-80.<sup>58</sup> The management's response went further to question the motives  
42 behind the combine, in particular their opposition to defence spending:

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45 The authors of the report suggest that there would be a  
46 contraction in the aerospace components industry as a result  
47 of successive Defence Cuts, a trend which they regard as  
48 desirable. On this premise they believe that the Company  
49 should be protecting the jobs of its employees by diversifying  
50 into socially acceptable/useful products, such as those  
51 indicated in the report'.<sup>59</sup>

52  
53 The management disagreed fundamentally with the combine on the value of the  
54 defence industry. Lucas Aerospace could not 'accept that aircraft, military or civil, do  
55 not have a social utility [as] civil aircraft are needed for business and pleasure  
56 activities, and it is necessary to maintain military aircraft for Defence'.<sup>60</sup> The combine  
57 perceived the response as an outright rejection due to its proposal to 'refer these  
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3 matters to the local consultative machinery' - an allusion to the trade unions.<sup>61</sup> This  
4 was seen by the combine as Lucas Aerospace kicking the plan into touch in which the  
5 initiative's fate would be decided by a network of trade union representatives. A  
6 series of acerbic letters followed between the combine and the management. When  
7 Ernie Scarbrow, the combine's secretary, requested material and manpower resources  
8 for further research, the response from the company was to employ the resources  
9 available from the trade unions.<sup>62</sup> The continuation of referrals to the unions infuriated  
10 the combine, which cited how the lack of official recognition 'represented a complete  
11 shift in the Company's policy' and 'departed from industrial relations custom and  
12 practice over the last five years'.<sup>63</sup> Still smarting from the official Lucas response to  
13 the workers' plan, Scarbrow warned that to 'have reached this decision without any  
14 negotiation represents for us a serious situation'.<sup>64</sup>  
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### 17 **The reaction from the Labour Party and the disarmament movement**

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20 After from the rejection of the plan by the Lucas management, the combine appealed  
21 for assistance by Labour Government ministers at the Department of Industry. In a  
22 letter to the industry secretary Eric Varley on 14 October 1976, Ernie Scarbrow  
23 lamented how 'the company have blankly refused to meet our combine committee,  
24 instead giving small, disconnected pieces of information to each site to prevent the  
25 trade unions as a whole having an overview of the company's policies'.<sup>65</sup> Varley did  
26 not personally respond, but the combine received a reply from the minister of state  
27 Gerald Kaufman, who was sceptical of the combine and of the concept of workers'  
28 control of industry. Like the Lucas management, Kaufman believed that the best  
29 course of action to pursue the issue was 'through the accepted trade union  
30 machinery'.<sup>66</sup> This route would mean that that the Department of Industry would defer  
31 to the relevant trade unions who act as an intermediary between the combine and the  
32 Lucas management. This began a tense relationship between the combine and the  
33 Department of Industry over the next four years. In a response to Kaufman, Scarbrow  
34 reiterated that Lucas Aerospace was refusing to meet the combine both to discuss the  
35 plan and the Government's tripartite strategy'.<sup>67</sup> A letter from the other minister of  
36 state in the Department, Les Huckfield, continued on the same line, stating that it was  
37 a matter for the company and its employees to consider 'a number of suggestions in  
38 the Plan'.<sup>68</sup> The combine began to speculate as to what support the Labour ministers  
39 in the Department of Industry were showing.  
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42 However, the combine did receive a much favourable reaction from the  
43 Labour left who promoted the importance of the combine within the Government.  
44 Left-wing Labour MPs were by the mid-1970s engaged with their own alternative  
45 plan to reduce defence spending and convert military industry into socially useful  
46 production. In 1974 the Labour left set up a study group on the party's National  
47 Executive Committee (NEC) to examine the potential for industrial conversion. The  
48 Lucas combine was the best example of how conversion could be achieved, and was  
49 lauded by the left on the study group. However, the study group attracted its own  
50 share of Labour MPs critical of drastic defence cuts, not least because of employment  
51 reasons. Among these were ministers of state at the various departments involved with  
52 military procurement, specifically the Ministry of Defence, Foreign Office and the  
53 Department of Industry. One of the most frequent attendees was Les Huckfield, the  
54 industry minister who, along with Kaufman, was chiefly involved in corresponding  
55 with the Lucas combine. Huckfield had exhibited more centre-left inclinations than  
56 Kaufman, and his correspondence displayed more empathy with the overall aims of  
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3 the combine to avert redundancies. Nonetheless, his dismissal of the combine's plans  
4 was equally firm. In a revealing meeting with left-wing MPs on the defence study  
5 group, Huckfield outlined his opposition to the combine in detail.

6 Huckfield admitted that he regarded the Lucas combine as 'a worthwhile  
7 initiative', which had aimed to 'utilize relevant skills in new ways', and forming a  
8 'constructive approach... where large scale restructuring was a possibility'.<sup>69</sup>  
9 However, this possibility was subject to conditions that the Labour minister sounded  
10 as a note of caution to his left-wing Party colleagues. Firstly, he thought that such  
11 diversification would take longer than what had been immediately envisioned by the  
12 combine, being of the belief that 'a timescale of something like five years would be  
13 required to secure a large scale transition from military to civil production that makes  
14 proper use of the workforce'.<sup>70</sup> This was explained by the demand of the market on  
15 which 'job opportunities depended first of all'. It was clear that production would  
16 have to be directed towards an existing market, or else a new market would 'have to  
17 be won... and not be taken for granted', with Huckfield warning that it took 'years of  
18 often heavy investment, to either break into new markets or significantly expand an  
19 existing one'. Rapidly enacted industrial conversion would be open to what Huckfield  
20 considered 'high commercial risk for the companies concerned, and may involve calls  
21 for large scale government support'. There were concerns about the financial and  
22 employment implications. 'New jobs', the minister contended, 'must not be at the  
23 expense of other workers' jobs in industries already producing for markets into which  
24 defence industries might expand'. This was a clear reference to the lack of attention  
25 the combine gave to appealing to private industry. The focus of the combine was  
26 reliant on the state as the main customer, where public expenditure would be diverted  
27 into social utility rather than defence expenditure. This question of political economy,  
28 so central to the outcome of the combine, was effectively being shut down by the  
29 Labour ministers inside the Department of Industry on the grounds of the risk that  
30 could be posed to employment and manufacturing.

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32 In the second half of his paper, Huckfield reiterated his earlier points on the  
33 risk to employment, but in more explicit terms, and with a focus on the virtues of  
34 military industry as major employer. While expressing 'a great deal of sympathy', for  
35 the combine, he was concerned at 'the very severe depression in the civilian side of  
36 aircraft and shipbuilding' which was 'changing the emphasis of the markets for  
37 defence industries in the short term'.<sup>71</sup> Huckfield made the link between the shrinking  
38 civilian market and the value of the defence sector, highlighting more clearly than  
39 ever before on its role as a major employer. 'Defence industries', particularly in a  
40 regional capacity 'were an important part of industrial structure', and were 'of  
41 material value to associated civilian industry'. Pertaining to Lucas, the minister  
42 remarked how 'in aerospace in particular, defence research and development has an  
43 important benefit for the viability of the civil industry'. Moreover, the export market,  
44 which was quoted by him as being worth some £850million per year could only be  
45 sustained 'if the UK armed services continued to show confidence in it by buying it  
46 themselves'. This was a reference to the role of Lucas Aerospace in the Tornado  
47 military aircraft, with an optimistic forecast on its potential on the export market.  
48 Concluding the paper, Huckfield saw the solution as being in the hands of the trade  
49 unions:  
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55 I believe we should take account of the trade unions which already  
56 organise in the defence industries and the views they frequently express to  
57 Government departments and ministers. They understand the difficulties  
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3 which are likely to be encountered in any transition from military to  
4 civilian work. What they tell us often is precisely the same point which I  
5 want to make in this submission - that any such transition will take a longer  
6 time than is frequently thought and must be carefully planned.  
7

8 While Labour ministers referred the combine to the trade unions, other Labour MPs  
9 were more supportive and provided much needed fortification for the combine. Two  
10 MPs, Audrey Wise and Jeff Rooker, identified with workers' control and anti-  
11 militarism. Consequently, the Lucas combine gained exposure in parliamentary  
12 debates. For example, when the annual government defence White Paper was debated  
13 in March 1977, Audrey Wise addressed the issue along economic lines, stating how  
14 the 'greater our economic dependence on arms production, the more difficult we shall  
15 find it to respond to genuine initiatives on controlled disarmament'.<sup>72</sup> Wise made  
16 reference to the combine's alternative plan, and pleaded for the Labour Government  
17 ministers that 'if we are ever to move towards controlled disarmament we shall have  
18 to look at alternative sources of employment for our people'.<sup>73</sup>  
19

20 The combine was also a feature of constituency level politics as  
21 Labour MPs with a local interest in Lucas Aerospace appealed directly to the industry  
22 ministers. Doug Hoyle, the MP for the Lancashire seat of Nelson and Colne near the  
23 Lucas plant at Burnley, wrote to Kaufman expressing his belief that it 'was monstrous  
24 that people [were] being thrown out of work when an alternative corporate plan that  
25 would prove beneficial to the nation is disregarded'.<sup>74</sup> The plight of the Lucas  
26 combine was aired in the House of Commons during the final parliamentary debate on  
27 Roy Mason's Defence Review on 1 April 1976. The Labour Left MP Tom Litterick,  
28 motivated by local concerns due to his constituency at Birmingham Selly Oak,  
29 commended the combine for having 'worked out an armaments substitute production  
30 strategy in which workers use their sophisticated skills to produce useful articles  
31 which do not threaten anyone, thus maintaining work and sensible economic activity  
32 in place of a destructive, wasteful and wholly inflationary economic activity'.<sup>75</sup>  
33 Litterick went further to accuse the Labour Government of turning a blind eye to  
34 potentially 'embarrassing policy statements such as those which have emerged from  
35 the workers of Lucas Aerospace, because the paranoia which underlies our arms  
36 strategy might be challenged by the voice of sanity, peace and hope for the rest of  
37 humanity'.<sup>76</sup> The petitions made by backbench Labour MPs reached the very top of  
38 the political pyramid when the Prime Minister Jim Callaghan responded to a letter  
39 from Dan Jones, the Labour MP for Burnley, where Lucas Aerospace was a  
40 significant local employer. Callaghan began by 'praising the efforts of the Lucas shop  
41 stewards... in a most welcome contribution to the national industrial relations  
42 scene'.<sup>77</sup> The Prime Minister's response sought to praise the Labour ministers who  
43 had been involved with the combine, citing that 'as a result of the actions of Eric  
44 Varley, Tony Benn and Gerald Kaufman there are now central discussions taking  
45 place between the Lucas management' and the relevant unions. Responding to Jones'  
46 request for a tripartite meeting between the combine, the company management and  
47 the government, Callaghan felt that it could be organised 'if it was felt that would  
48 help, before adding that 'as I hope you will agree, after looking fairly at the  
49 Government's record in this case, that the part taken by Ministers has been wholly  
50 constructive and that the best thing to do now is wait'.<sup>78</sup>  
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55 While experiencing frustration with the response from Labour  
56 ministers, the combine was met with enthusiasm from the wider disarmament  
57 movement. The workers' phrase of 'neither bombs nor dole, but conversion'  
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3 resonated with the peace movement, not least because the combine had provided a  
4 practicable solution that had contrasted with the largely moralistic approach of nuclear  
5 unilateralists.<sup>79</sup> In this sense, the combine compensated for the lack of technological  
6 expertise by those on the academic and political left. One shop steward remarked that  
7 'the disarmament movement had failed to come up with an alternative, but once the  
8 workers had provided something detailed and credible the peace groups gave a lot of  
9 support'.<sup>80</sup> CND was enthusiastic in its support for the combine, where delegates at its  
10 annual conference in 1978 acknowledged that 'the situation had worsened' insofar as  
11 'the management had sought to offer redundancies in trying to undermine the Lucas  
12 Combine Committee'.<sup>81</sup> CND thus resolved to place 'greater emphasis on the  
13 promotion of alternatives to employment of people and resources in the arms  
14 industries and the armed forces'.<sup>82</sup> CND's general secretary Duncan Rees recalled  
15 that the combine had 'broadened the debate to arms manufacture' and so  
16 demonstrated that the 'moral dimension of disarmament had a practical side, creating  
17 or saving jobs at the same time as reducing armaments'.<sup>83</sup> The conference was  
18 addressed by Mike Cooley, a shop steward from the combine, who saw the CND as a  
19 potential vehicle for 'ideas to be diffused as widely as possible to the rest of society'.<sup>84</sup>  
20 A resolution tendered by the specialist branch, Trade Union CND, who argued that 'if  
21 the campaign for cuts in arms spending is to succeed in times of heavy  
22 unemployment, than the work of the Lucas stewards and others need to be matched by  
23 much stronger public demand' for socially useful production.<sup>85</sup>  
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### 28 **The reaction from the trade unions**

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30 The Labour Government had continually referred the combine to their relevant trade  
31 unions. The combine-union reaction would prove to be a mixed one, varying from  
32 union to union, and ultimately providing the main obstacle to any chance of  
33 implementing the combine's plan for socially useful production. The combine initially  
34 enjoyed a favourable reaction from the most powerful union platform in Britain, the  
35 Trade Union Congress (TUC). Correspondence between the combine and the TUC  
36 began in a letter alerting it to Lucas Aerospace's 'plans for further redundancies at a  
37 number of sites', and so representing a 'multinational company intent on sacking  
38 highly skilled workers that you and this country so badly needs'.<sup>86</sup> The secretary of  
39 the TUC's economic department, David Lea, responded to the combine, 'sharing their  
40 concerns about the company's unwillingness to meet', and explained how the case of  
41 the Lucas workers had been discussed at a recent meeting of the TUC's Industrial  
42 Strategy Staff Group.<sup>87</sup> Yet, the TUC was inclined to divert the combine in the  
43 direction of the company management, suggesting that the combine 'again approach  
44 the company on this matter... pointing out that workers have an interest in and a  
45 responsibility for planning for a company's future'.<sup>88</sup> Writing to the Lucas' director of  
46 personnel, the combine included a copy of the TUC letter, 'acquainting the  
47 management with the TUC viewpoint'.<sup>89</sup> The Lucas management issued a sharp  
48 response, stating that it would not recognise the combine as an official body, and that  
49 the company 'would not make any arrangement that would prejudice the exiting  
50 procedural arrangements we have between both staff and the manual unions'.<sup>90</sup> This  
51 response infuriated the combine, with the combine secretary Ernie Scarbrow stating  
52 that Lucas had performed a 'complete shift in policy' and that 'not recognising the  
53 combine, represents for us a very serious situation'.<sup>91</sup>  
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3 However, the display of support from the TUC, even if it was vague, was met  
4 with consternation from individual unions who had involvement with Lucas  
5 Aerospace. The combine committee was deemed by smaller unions as an 'unofficial  
6 body' and, the union resented the intervention of the TUC which he felt had 'cut  
7 across the official trade union movement within Lucas'.<sup>92</sup> The advice given by the  
8 TUC to the combine was thus 'misleading' in the encouragement it gave, and the  
9 union felt it was the responsibility of the TUC to correct it. This episode was  
10 indicative of the contemporary trade union environment, in which the TUC did not  
11 seek to over-ride individual unions on matters of industrial dispute at a local level. An  
12 apologetic David Lea responded directly, retracting his earlier encouragement to the  
13 combine, and stating 'it was a matter of regret when existing procedures are  
14 accidentally cut across'.<sup>93</sup> It was evident that this had been a chastening experience  
15 for representatives in the TUC. From this point onwards, as the archival holdings  
16 suggest, the TUC's involvement was notable by its absence.

17  
18 Instead, the key union for the prospects of the Lucas combine was the  
19 Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (known as the CSEU, or  
20 Confederation for short) which acted as an umbrella organisation for a series of  
21 smaller technical unions in shipbuilding and aerospace. The Confederation would  
22 prove to be the ultimate obstacle to the combine, as the workers recalled that its  
23 'insistence on controlling all contact between trade unionists in engineering and  
24 government ministers proved to be a major difficulty'.<sup>94</sup> The Confederation ultimately  
25 adopted the role of dealing with the combine directly, filling a void that was  
26 purposefully left for them by the Labour ministers at the Department of Industry. This  
27 view was held by the combine itself, who viewed the Confederation and the Labour  
28 ministers as being of two sides of the same problem. Gerald Kaufman expressed the  
29 'clear understanding from the Department that the Confederation would respond in a  
30 positive way to requests from the Combine Committee, provided of course [it] uses  
31 the established trade-union machinery'.<sup>95</sup> This view was shared by Les Huckfield in  
32 his correspondence with Labour's National Executive Committee that same month,  
33 stressing that 'plans should initially be discussed by with the Lucas management  
34 through recognised trade union channels'.<sup>96</sup> This was evidently the preferred option of  
35 the Labour ministers, rather than direct intervention.

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37 The terminology of 'recognised trade union channels' was interpreted as a  
38 'creeping innuendo' by the Lucas combine.<sup>97</sup> It was significant in two ways, both of  
39 which would impede the alternative plan. Firstly, the Labour ministers abdicated the  
40 possibility of direct intervention, electing instead to defer to union policy to steer the  
41 course between the combine and the Lucas management. Secondly, there was the  
42 issue of official recognition of the combine by Confederation. The Lucas combine  
43 was not an official union body, and was instead regarded as having represented  
44 employees from a variety of different Lucas facilities nationwide. This diminished the  
45 standing of the combine in the view of both the ministers and the unions. What made  
46 the situation more difficult for the combine was that their fate now rested on union  
47 intervention, given that a Department of Industry had gradually withdrawn from  
48 making direct approaches to the Lucas management.

49  
50 Relations between the combine and the Confederation were fraught from the  
51 offset. Feeling 'surprise and disappointment that there was no response' to an earlier  
52 letter, Scarbrow lamented how 'it might be just a matter of routine for you, but for us  
53 it is a matter of whether we will lose our jobs or not', and that there was 'no option  
54 but to inform the ministers that there was no response from the trade union'.<sup>98</sup> This  
55 began a process in which the combine sought a 'tripartite meeting' between  
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3 themselves, the Lucas management and the Department of Industry, and so would  
4 bypass the Confederation altogether. The combine wrote to the industry secretary Eric  
5 Varley in order to 'establish precisely why the Company is unwilling to discuss [the]  
6 plans', and citing how 'a more direct action is required by the government' to 'break  
7 out of this impasse that the Company's intransigence is placing on us'.<sup>99</sup> Varley did  
8 not respond, in keeping with his general lack of correspondence with the combine  
9 after 1976. Instead Huckfield again replied to the combine, stating that both he and  
10 Kaufman approached the Confederation, and had felt that this was the best channel for  
11 advancing the initiative.<sup>100</sup> At this point the exasperation felt by the combine had  
12 manifested in its correspondence. In another letter, again directed to Varley, the  
13 combine articulated how it was 'continually given the impression by the Company  
14 that the Department supports them against us', and saw 'no good reason why the  
15 Department would not accede to the request' for a tripartite meeting.<sup>101</sup> Huckfield  
16 tried to allay the grievances felt by the combine in remarking how he was 'sorry that  
17 you got the impression that the government was supporting the management against  
18 the workforce', reinforcing that both he and Kaufman had 'told the management that  
19 we would be most concerned at redundancies'.<sup>102</sup>

22 Nonetheless, by deferring to the trade unions, the Labour ministers had  
23 empowered the Confederation to deal with the combine. Over the course of 1978, the  
24 Confederation met the Lucas management with increased frequency. The first such  
25 meeting occurred in March 1978, and later in July. Huckfield was pleased to note that  
26 a 'working group' had been established, including 'some members of the Combine  
27 Shop Stewards Committee', with the aim of 'visiting sites threatened with closure'.  
28 He was hopeful that the work of the combine could be utilised, believing that 'the  
29 intention is to report on the prospects for alternative work at these sites, and no doubt  
30 the working party will take into account the suggestions for alternative products in the  
31 Plan'.<sup>103</sup> However, it was evident from the outset that the Confederation was  
32 unwilling to recognise the combine as an official trade union group. The minutes of  
33 the Confederation's Executive Committee record how an application from the  
34 combine 'for official recognition' was received in April 1978. Nonetheless, the  
35 Confederation leadership stated that there 'was no provision in the constitution for the  
36 recognition of combine committees'.<sup>104</sup> This major trade union, which represented  
37 workers across a broad spectrum of mechanical engineering across Britain, did not  
38 want a smaller, unofficial combine of potentially militant left-wing shop-stewards  
39 meddling in its relations with business. The Confederation, in its capacity as the  
40 largest representative of skilled labour in Lucas Aerospace, used its influence to  
41 discuss with the company management directly, over the heads of the workers. This  
42 was clear in a series of meetings in 1978, just as the combine was beginning to lose its  
43 momentum.

46 When the Confederation did engage with the Lucas management, it was not on  
47 the issues of either the combine or alternative production. Instead, the Confederation  
48 took its own interest of 'requesting a meeting of the management on employment  
49 prospects' of the company.<sup>105</sup> In reply, the Lucas management stated that 'it was  
50 making a detailed assessment of the business... but it was certainly the intention to  
51 meet'.<sup>106</sup> The Confederation liaised with the Lucas management on its restructuring of  
52 the aerospace sector, and 'would endorse the decision to campaign for the buying of  
53 20 British 111-600 series', a commercial jet aimed for Boeing in the American market  
54 'and that the Executive Committee would be kept fully informed regarding further  
55 arrangements'.<sup>107</sup> The issue was of contemporary significance, as the specific aircraft  
56 was debated in the House of Lords the following month.<sup>108</sup> The Confederation was  
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3 evidently more concerned with sustaining employment, making formal  
4 representations to the Lucas management. A belief existed within the union that it  
5 held significant sway, recording that after having discussions within the management  
6 about the restructuring of the company. The announcement in May 1978 of a new  
7 Lucas Aerospace plant in Huyton, Liverpool, with the employment of some 500  
8 skilled workers, was 'met with satisfaction' from the Confederation, which  
9 confidently asserted that 'there was no doubt that our representations had an influence  
10 on this matter'.<sup>109</sup>

11 The revelation of the new plant in Huyton aroused suspicion and  
12 disappointment from the combine. The constituency's sitting MP was none other than  
13 the former Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and the combine did not hesitate to  
14 accuse the Labour Government, Department of Industry and the Confederation of  
15 having a close relationship with Lucas Aerospace. Ernie Scarbrow's letter to Jeff  
16 Rooker, a Liverpool MP who supported the combine, showed what he felt was the  
17 reasoning behind the Government's announcement:  
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21 We now think that the inactivity of the Department of Industry may be  
22 more sinister than just bureaucratic obstruction... Lucas is heavily  
23 dependent on government purchasing power, not only in the aircraft  
24 industry but also in the automotive field... we think they would not have  
25 dared to announce a factory closure in somewhere as sensitive as Liverpool  
26 without a nod from somewhere in government. The Lucas Aerospace  
27 Combine was seeking a parliamentary enquiry into the role of the  
28 Department of Industry in all of this.<sup>110</sup>  
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30 Although the Confederation had a clear ownership of the combine issue, there was  
31 evidence of dissent from some smaller unions, who called into question the role  
32 played by both the major unions and the Labour Government in the apparent impasse.  
33 In July 1978, a resolution was passed by the Coventry branch of the Amalgamated  
34 Union of Engineering Workers, an area close to both Lucas Aerospace and Rolls  
35 Royce facilities. The resolution called 'upon the Government to investigate the  
36 obstruction by ministers and their colleagues' into the situation, and sought 'an open  
37 and public debate on the role that ministers played in the matter'.<sup>111</sup> Huckfield  
38 responded directly by reiterating how the Department of Industry had 'consistently  
39 welcomed the efforts' of the combine, 'but felt that detailed discussion' about the  
40 workers' plan 'should take place between representatives of the workforce and  
41 company management'.<sup>112</sup> That same month, the Labour MP Jeff Rooker referred to  
42 the resolution in the Commons, calling on Kaufman at ministers' questions to respond  
43 to the 'inquiry into the role of the Department of Industry in the last two years, when  
44 it has done nothing to help these workers'.<sup>113</sup> Kaufman responded to Rooker by  
45 emphasising that if the 'Confederation comes forward with plans or asks for a  
46 tripartite meeting, the Government will convene it'.  
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49 In 1978, a half-hour documentary was commissioned by the Open University  
50 in conjunction with the Centre for Alternative, Industrial and Technological Systems  
51 (CAITS) to detail the combine's experience. Entitled, 'Doesn't Anybody Want to  
52 Know?', the documentary featured interviews with combine members across the  
53 country, including workers on the shop floor and shop stewards such as Mike Cooley  
54 and Ernie Scarbrow. The documentary vividly captured the frustration felt by the  
55 combine towards the Labour Government, Lucas management and trade unions. Mike  
56 Cooley argued that the main obstacle was the 'concern felt by the company at the shift  
57 in power to the workers', while the trade unions refused to recognise the workers'  
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3 plan as it 'operated outside of union traditions'.<sup>114</sup> The documentary also featured  
4 interviews with Labour MPs Jeff Rooker and Audrey Wise who lamented 'the great  
5 myth as far as the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards are concerned that parliament runs  
6 the country' when it was the 'executive branch of government in Whitehall' made the  
7 major decisions. With the bleak forecast of further job losses across Lucas Aerospace,  
8 the tone of the documentary was rueful of the lost opportunities of the 1970s. The  
9 Labour Government was criticised for its inaction, despite Tony Benn, at that point  
10 the energy minister, giving his own analysis of the combine. Benn was evidently in  
11 favour of the combine's alternative plans, as he had been when he first met the  
12 workers in 1974. However, his advice to the workers' when interviewed in the  
13 documentary was to take the 'long term perspective'. His comparison of the combine  
14 to the radical movements of the Levellers and the Chartists was met by derision from  
15 the makers of the documentary who scorned how:  
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19 'The long-term perspective may be fine for a politician like Tony Benn, but it doesn't  
20 deal with the immediate prospect of plan closures and loss of jobs that the alternative  
21 corporate plan was designed to avoid'.<sup>115</sup>  
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23 The fortunes of the combine were not to improve after these series of challenges from  
24 the Labour Government and the trade unions. Labour's defeat at the 1979 General  
25 Election, while not ending the activity of the combine outright, did herald a new set of  
26 challenges. The Conservatives were against the idea of workers' cooperatives, and did  
27 not give much consideration to industrial conversion. The workers recalled that this in  
28 effect let the Lucas management off the hook, as the 'company avoided the  
29 embarrassment of any political limelight that the discussions on alternative products  
30 might have attracted under a Labour Government'.<sup>116</sup> No such interest was expressed  
31 from the Labour ministers, let alone on the Conservative side. Instead as the early  
32 1980s unfolded, what the combine considered as 'the abrasively anti-union  
33 atmosphere of the Thatcher government' fostered an environment in which Lucas  
34 Aerospace 'could move more directly to undermine trade-union strength'.<sup>117</sup> There  
35 was admissions of exhaustion and exasperation from the combine itself, having been  
36 'entangled for three years in the ropes of Confederation procedures and the red tape of  
37 the Department of Industry, was [no longer] in a position to stand up to the new  
38 offensive'.<sup>118</sup>  
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## 41 Conclusions

42  
43 The Lucas combine was venerated by the left who continued their attack on British  
44 defence expenditure into the 1980s. In two of the most famous left-wing accounts of  
45 Cold War militarism, Mary Kaldor referenced the case of the Lucas combine, both in  
46 the 1980 *Protest and Survive* and in her own *Baroque Arsenal* in 1982, which argued  
47 of a military-industrial-complex within the western powers.<sup>119</sup> The example of Lucas  
48 was clearly seen in another combine in a major British defence manufacturer, Vickers,  
49 who produced military aircraft and shipping, including the new sea-based nuclear  
50 deterrent, Trident. The case of the workers at Vickers met with similar resistance from  
51 company management, and was accounted for in significant detail, again by Hilary  
52 Wainwright.<sup>120</sup> Despite the decline of the Lucas combine by the late 1970s, its  
53 example was adopted by leftist academics who in 1978 established the Centre for  
54 Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems (CAITS) and the North London  
55 Polytechnic. The combine became a beacon for the 1980s campaign for alternative  
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3 production in the technology industry, as evidenced by Mike Cooley's influential  
4 scientific account *Architect or Bee?* that included a retrospective account, 'The Lucas  
5 Combine Ten Years On'.<sup>121</sup> Although the combine failed to achieve its objectives in  
6 the 1970s, its legacy continued to be significant among left-wing academics and  
7 workers.

8  
9 The Lucas combine succeeded at the very least in exemplifying how industrial  
10 conversion could be achieved. That the combine co-existed independently from the  
11 influence of the left-wing on the Labour Party is an important consideration. 'Socially  
12 useful production' was not the preserve of the academic and political spheres; instead  
13 it was more evident and at an earlier stage in the defence industry. There was a  
14 growing belief that workers could provide the alternative. This was, as Richard  
15 Hyman argued in 1975, a response to the industrial crises of the early 1970s, where  
16 workers adopted what he regarded as a 'positive challenge to the employer, involving  
17 a different relationship of control'.<sup>122</sup> Michael Gold elaborated on this change of  
18 relationship at more length in 2004 when reviewing industrial relations in the 1970s,  
19 including the Lucas combine:

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24 These positive challenges to the employer reveal attempts to harness  
25 creatively the motivation and commitment to defend their jobs in times of  
26 threat. They all took into account the specific circumstances of the workers  
27 involved, such as their labour-market conditions, the size and structure of  
28 the industry concerned, the nature of the product markets, skill profile and  
29 links to the wider community.<sup>123</sup>

30  
31 The Lucas combine is regarded more recently by the left as a triumph of worker's  
32 ambition for alternative production. A *Guardian* article in 2014 recalled how 'half of  
33 Lucas' output supplied military contracts [which] depended upon public funds', and  
34 so 'workers argued state support be better put to developing more socially useful  
35 products'.<sup>124</sup> Another *Guardian* article argued that the Lucas combine 'challenged  
36 some of the presumed technophobia of the left', that was felt that leftist thinkers were  
37 limited only to theoretical frameworks, and not actual prototypes.<sup>125</sup> The socialist  
38 magazine, *Red Pepper*, remarked that the 'alternative plan and the combine committee  
39 were a classic product of the co-operative, egalitarian creativity of the late 1960s and  
40 1970s' which challenged 'authority and sought individual realisation'.<sup>126</sup> But the  
41 combine instead 'came up against trade union, government and management  
42 institutions stuck in the command and control mentalities, and the power of the  
43 movement was destroyed by Thatcher's onslaught against the unions and radical local  
44 government in the 1980s'.<sup>127</sup> However, it was not simply the arrival of a Conservative  
45 Government in 1979 that defeated the Lucas combine. It was also argued to have been  
46 undone by 'a retreat from radicalism of the Labour Government' after coming to  
47 office in 1974, and by the 'suspicion and intransigence of some sections of the  
48 national leadership of the trade unions'.<sup>128</sup>

49  
50 The legacy of the Lucas combine can be seen in more recent critiques of  
51 British defence-industrial policy. Economic circumstances have prompted a greater  
52 scrutiny on public expenditure, with defence being the main target for left-wing  
53 opposition, just as it had been in the 1970s. The left-wing of the Parliamentary Labour  
54 Party is not as sizeable as it was in the 1970s, and external peace-movements have  
55 provided the most significant enquiry into the political economy of defence spending.  
56 For instance, workers at the Unite union in 2016 issued a pamphlet, *Unite against*  
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3 *Trident*, which detailed ‘an alternative vision of expanding employment away from  
4 arms production and into renewable energy and environmental technologies’.<sup>129</sup> More  
5 publicly, CND has framed its opposition to the Trident replacement system by arguing  
6 that public expenditure would be better spent on the socially useful production,  
7 especially in healthcare. Moreover, CND have rejected the case that cancellation of  
8 Trident would cost jobs by arguing that this technological expertise could be  
9 employed in civilian industries.<sup>130</sup> The Lucas combine continues to provide an  
10 example of how industrial conversion could be achieved, with a clear similarity to the  
11 economic conditions in the 1970s that intensifies left-wing ambitions for change.  
12 Nonetheless, there still exists a reliance on the government to enact radical changes in  
13 policy. With a broad consensus on the nuclear question, as was the case during the  
14 Cold War, left-wing activists continue to campaign against the long established  
15 patterns of defence-industrial policies.

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17 Arguably the most considered critique of the Lucas combine was a review of  
18 *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* by *Marxism Today* in 1982.  
19 The reviewer, Grahame Thompson, praised the ‘fascinating and enterprising attempt  
20 to preserve jobs’ from the combine, but added two important critical observations.  
21 Firstly, the combine was by its nature fragmented over a combination of regional  
22 facilities, and a lack of a ‘nationally agreed strategy’ meant that it was ‘unlikely that  
23 the range of products could be successfully produced or marketed’. To this end,  
24 Thompson thought the combine was being ‘*too* ambitious rather than not being  
25 ambitious enough’, and should have curtailed its energy into a restricted number of  
26 marketable products.<sup>131</sup> The second critique cut to the core of the ‘socially-useful’  
27 ideal, noting that concept of ‘socially useful production’ remained ‘relatively  
28 unexplored’ in the workers’ plan. Thompson argued that although the combine’s  
29 prototypes were technically feasible and of apparent social utility, this was ‘no  
30 argument that they would provide a financially and economically viable set of  
31 products’. Thompson challenged the conceptual underpinning that motivated the  
32 combine, as well as the intellectual left had that encouraged it:

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37 We need to question whether armaments production is not as socially  
38 useful as is made out. Clearly this *one* of the UK’s most successful  
39 industries, and measured in terms of international competitiveness and the  
40 absence of a benign international situation, quite a socially useful one, it  
41 could be argued. What is not socially useful about wanting to defend one’s  
42 national integrity as best one can? As it stands, the authors of the *Lucas*  
43 *Plan* adopt a somewhat moralistic attitude towards what is socially useful  
44 or not, mirroring the more general Left hostility towards arms production.  
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46 That the defence industry was one of Britain’s more successful industries, as  
47 Thompson observed, is a crucial point in the failure of the combine. While the  
48 workers focused on the social utility of the alternatives to defence production, they  
49 failed to both take account of the success of Lucas Aerospace as a military contractor  
50 and as to where a new market for socially useful products could be cultivated. The  
51 combine needs to be seen within the context of British weapon procurement policy in  
52 the Cold War. The policy of successive governments to ‘buy British’ enabled firms  
53 such as Lucas to become more reliant on lucrative defence contracts and developed a  
54 close working relationship between the company and government departments such as  
55 the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Industry.<sup>132</sup> The motivation of the  
56 combine was twofold - to move away from defence production, and to redirect control  
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of production away from the company-state-union axis towards the workers. But ultimately, on both defence and industrial reform, the Lucas combine was unassisted by a Labour Government unwilling to impede on military production and the trade union status quo. In so doing, Labour's defence and industrial policy continued to be resistant to change. The Lucas Aerospace combine was seen, as early as the 1980s, as being of its time. The combine was deemed as being 'correctly hesitant about the adequacy of nationalisation as a socialist objective', but had still not plotted a definitive way forward for those on the left. 'Fresh approaches', Grahame Thompson remarked in 1983, would 'also need to be developed that do not uncritically endorse or fetishise "workers initiatives" either'.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Coopey and Woodward, *Britain in the 1970s*; Philips, 'Industrial Relations, Historical Contingencies and Political Economy: Britain in the 1960s and 1970s'; Seldon and Hickson *New Labour, Old Labour: the Wilson and Callaghan Governments, 1974-79*; Tomlinson, 'British Government and Popular Understanding of Inflation in the Mid-1970s', 750-768.

<sup>2</sup> Dunne, 'The Changing Military Industrial Complex in the UK', 91-111; Gummet, 'Civil and Military Aircraft in the UK', 203-222; Hartley, 'The Defence Economy' in Coopey and Woodward, *Britain in the 1970s*, 212-35.

<sup>3</sup> Weapon procurement has been argued as being 'the poor relation of the historiography of British defence policy' by Chin, *British Defence Procurement and the Futility of Reform*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Two of the most significant examples of this are Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970*; Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy*.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of this literature include Allaun, *The Wasted £300,000,000*; Kaldor, Smith and Cook, *An Anti-White Paper, Sense about Defence: The Report of the Labour Party Defence Study Group*; Kaldor, Smith and Vines, *Democratic Socialism and the Cost of Defence*.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor and Pritchard, *The Protest Makers: The British Nuclear Disarmament Movement of 1958-1965, Twenty Years On*, 137-40; Pimlott, 'Trade Unions and the Second Coming of CND' in Cook and Pimlott, *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, 206-7.

<sup>7</sup> This was later published as the *Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards' Committee: Democracy versus the Circumlocution Office*, Institute for Workers' Control Pamphlet no. 65, March 1979.

<sup>8</sup> *Sense about Defence*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 268-9.

<sup>10</sup> The combine's experience was articulated by Elliot in a Fabian pamphlet, and then subsequently with Wainwright in a paperback, *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Nockholds, *Lucas: The First Hundred Years*, 306.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Straw and Young, 'The Wilson Government and the Demise of TSR-2, October 1964 - April 1965'.

<sup>16</sup> Nockholds, *Lucas: The First Hundred Years*, 287.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Hayward, *The British Aircraft Industry*, 121-6.

<sup>20</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> See Smith, 'Defence Contractors and Diversification into the Civil Sector: Rolls-Royce, 1945-2005'.

<sup>23</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 296.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> The political sympathies of Cooley and Scarbrow is not articulated in accounts of the combine, but is mentioned by Benn in his diary entry, when he describes the combine leadership as being an 'international socialist' and a 'communist' respectively. See Benn, *Against the Tide*, 505.

<sup>28</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> This case was made at length by Kaldor in *Baroque Arsenal*, which specifically referenced the Lucas combine on 216.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>33</sup> Papers deposited from Hilary Wainwright to the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to Tony Benn, 6 July 1974.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Tony Benn to Ernie Scarbrow, 2 August 1974.
- <sup>36</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 83.
- <sup>37</sup> Foster and Woolfson, 'How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle: The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Work-In, 1971-2', in Campbell, Fishman and McIlroy, *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics*, 297-325.
- <sup>38</sup> Kaufman, 'Eric Varley, Baron Varley (1932-2008)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, January 2012.
- <sup>39</sup> Kaufman, *How to be a Minister* (London, 1980), 132.
- <sup>40</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, 'Summary of the Meeting between the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine Committee with the Secretary of State for Industry, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn, at the Department of Industry, Victoria Street, London S.W.1 on Monday 11 November 1974'.
- <sup>41</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, WAIN/8/9-18, 'Summary of the Meeting between the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine Committee with the Secretary of State for Industry, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn.'
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Benn, *Against the Tide*, 262.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 505.
- <sup>45</sup> Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 4.
- <sup>46</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 10.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>49</sup> Elliot, *The Lucas Aerospace Workers' Campaign*, 5.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> *New Scientist*, 29 January 1976, 239.
- <sup>53</sup> Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee, *Lucas: An Alternative Plan*, 3.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>55</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/1-8, 'Lucas 78<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, 1975', 2.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, 'A Response to a Report called the 'Lucas Plan'.
- <sup>58</sup> TNA, CAB/129/181, 'Statement on the Defence Estimates 1975', I-34.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, 115.
- <sup>62</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Alan Witney (Personnel Manager at Lucas Aerospace) to Ernie Scarbrow, 19 November 1976.
- <sup>63</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to Alan Witney, 29 December 1976.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>65</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to Eric Varley, 14 October 1976.
- <sup>66</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Gerald Kaufman to Ernie Scarbrow, 4 November 1976.
- <sup>67</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to Gerald Kaufman, 6 December 1976.
- <sup>68</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Les Huckfield to Ernie Scarbrow, 24 December 1976.
- <sup>69</sup> Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (henceforth MRC), MSS/76/9/8, 'Discussion Paper on the Industrial and Employment Implications of Converting from Defence to Civil Production, Submitted by Mr Huckfield, May 1977 to NEC Study Group on Defence Expenditure'
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>71</sup> MRC., MSS.292D/620/3, 'Comments on the Defence Report from the Department of Industry'.
- <sup>72</sup> *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 'Defence', 22 March 1977.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>74</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Doug Hoyle to Les Huckfield, 17 March 1976.
- <sup>75</sup> *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 'Defence', 1 April 1976, Vol. 908, cc.1591-722.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Jim Callaghan to Dan Jones, 4 August 1978.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>79</sup> Wainwright & Elliot, 155.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.
- <sup>81</sup> London School of Economics and Political Science Archives and Special Collections (henceforth LSE), CND/2008/5/15, 'General Secretary's Report to the Annual Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament Conference, 4 & 5 November 1978'.

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- <sup>82</sup> LSE, CND/2005/5/15, 'Resolutions Passed at the 1978 Annual Conference'.  
<sup>83</sup> Barnaby and Holdstock, *The British Nuclear Weapons Programme*, 59.  
<sup>84</sup> *Sanity*, 'Mike Cooley addresses the Conference Delegates', November/December 1978, p.9.  
<sup>85</sup> LSE, CND/2008/5/15, 'Resolutions and Amendments', CND Annual Conference, 4-5 November 1978.  
<sup>86</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Ernie Scarbrow to David Lea, 1 November 1976.  
<sup>87</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, David Lea to Ernie Scarbrow, 11 November 1976  
<sup>88</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>89</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Ernie Scarbrow to Alan. Witney, 16 November 1976.  
<sup>90</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Alan Witney to Ernie Scarbrow, 2 December 1976.  
<sup>91</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Ernie Scarbrow to Alan Witney, 29 December 1976.  
<sup>92</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Ray Edwards to David Lea, 16 February 1977.  
<sup>93</sup> MRC, MSS292D/260/2, David Lea to Ray Edwards, 7 February 1977.  
<sup>94</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 84.  
<sup>95</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Gerald Kaufman to Jeff Rooker, 22 June 1977.  
<sup>96</sup> MRC, MSS.292D/620/3, 'Comments on the Defence Report from the Department of Industry'.  
<sup>97</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 178.  
<sup>98</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to the General Secretary of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, 6 October 1977.  
<sup>99</sup> LHASC, WAIN/18/8-9, Ernie Scarbrow to Eric Varley, 5 April 1978.  
<sup>100</sup> LHASC, WAIN/18/8-9, Leslie Huckfield to Ernie Scarbrow, 25 April 1978.  
<sup>101</sup> LHASC, WAIN/18/8-9, Ernie Scarbrow to Eric Varley, 14 May 1978.  
<sup>102</sup> LHASC, WAIN/18/8-9, Leslie Huckfield to Ernie Scarbrow, 23 May 1978.  
<sup>103</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Leslie Huckfield to E.M. Jackson, Secretary of the Coventry AUEW, 16 August 1978.  
<sup>104</sup> MRC, MSS.259/CSEU/1/1/10, 'Confederation Minutes 1974-1978', 13 April 1978.  
<sup>105</sup> MRC, MSS.259/CSEU/1/1/10, 'Confederation Minutes 1974-1978', 13 October 1977.  
<sup>106</sup> MRC, MSS.259/CSEU/1/1/10, 'Confederation Minutes 1974-1978', 8 February 1978.  
<sup>107</sup> MRC, MSS.259/CSEU/1/1/10, 'Confederation Minutes 1974-1978', 13 April 1978.  
<sup>108</sup> *Hansard*, House of Lords Debate, 'British Airways: Aircraft Purchases', 8 May 1978 Vol. 391 cc. 759-76.  
<sup>109</sup> MRC, MSS.259/CSEU/1/1/10, 'Confederation Minutes 1974-1978', 26 June 1978.  
<sup>110</sup> LHASC, WAIN/8/9-18, Ernie Scarbrow to Jeff Rooker, 28 March 1978.  
<sup>111</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Resolution from the Coventry Branch of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW), 24 July 1978.  
<sup>112</sup> MRC, MSS.76/9/8, Letter from Leslie Huckfield to E.M. Jackson, Secretary of the Coventry AUEW, 16 August 1978.  
<sup>113</sup> *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 'Lucas Aerospace', 10 July 1978; Vol. 953 cc. 998-9.  
<sup>114</sup> This documentary is accessible via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pgQqfpub-c>.  
<sup>115</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>116</sup> Wainwright and Elliot, *The Lucas Plan*, 197.  
<sup>117</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>118</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>119</sup> Thompson and Smith, *Protest and Survive*, 203; Kaldor, *Baroque Arsenal*, 216.  
<sup>120</sup> Beynon and Wainwright, *The Worker's Report on Vickers*.  
<sup>121</sup> Cooley, *Architect or Bee?*  
<sup>122</sup> Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, 101.  
<sup>123</sup> Gold, 'Worker Mobilisation in the 1970s: Revisiting Work-Ins, Cooperatives and Alternative Corporate Plans', 70.  
<sup>124</sup> *Guardian*, 22 January 2014.  
<sup>125</sup> *Guardian*, 21 January 2012.  
<sup>126</sup> *Red Pepper*, October 2009, accessible on [www.redpepper.org](http://www.redpepper.org).  
<sup>127</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>128</sup> Mike Quiggin, 'Socially Useful Production', 1429.  
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<sup>131</sup> *Marxism Today*, 'Book Review: *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* by Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliot', February 1983.46.  
<sup>132</sup> Chin, *British Defence Procurement and the Futility of Reform*, 62-5.

<sup>133</sup> *Marxism Today*, 'Book Review: The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?' by Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliot', February 1983. 46.

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