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Ecology

Convert the ailing car industry!

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With the economic recession and environmental crisis alternative plans for socially useful, sustainable production have never been more relevant. When the financial shit hit the fan last year the overproduction in the auto industry became visible.

In the Swedish auto industry the proportions between fan and shit was especially problematic. The crisis involved two of the world's smallest mass producers, both owned by troubled US corporations, and both producing large, fuel consuming semi-luxury cars. In a country of 9 million it was like having two bankrupt car companies and their chain of sub contractors plus two crisis-hit truck companies in London.

The auto crisis of course became a big political issue in Sweden and still is. As elsewhere in the world there were two principle lines of argument in the mainstream discussion about what should be done.

One line of argument supported "creative destruction" on the basis that the market had made its verdict and some of the corporations had been sentenced to death. The market should not be tampered with as that would only make things worse. A green variant on this was "Cars are damaging the climate. We don't need them or the companies that make them. It's good if the auto industry goes away.'

The other main line of argument advocated support for the industry. The government, it was said, must subsidise the companies to help them through these troubled times so that they can be ready to grow again when things get back to normal. There should be loans, the scrapping of incentives, tax breaks and so on. In Sweden this has been the line of Social Democracy, the industry itself, many analysts and the unions. The leaders of my union made their "contribution" by signing a contract that temporarily reduced members' pay and working time.

Both these approaches to the crisis are disastrous. The fundamental assumption behind the "support-the-industry" position is false. There will not be any "back to normal", at least not an endlessly expanding production of cars.

Road transport is responsible for about 20 % of greenhouse gas emissions in the EU, transport being the sector where emissions are increasing the fastest.

Even without the need to stop climate change the time of the car is running out. The production of oil is going to peak in the near future and this cheap energy will no longer be available. In fact a transport system based on mass auto transit is not an option at all. And the industry's answer - the green car, fuel efficient, running on renewable fuels - is an illusion.

It is true that the average CO2 emission per kilometer from new cars is going down but while the period 1995-2002 saw a 13% average decrease in fuel consumption for new cars in the EU countries there was a rise in total fuel consumption by 7% because of traffic increases.[1]

Agrofuel is no solution. For example in forest-rich Sweden, DME synthetic diesel made from wood is presented as the future. However, just to replace the consumption of oil by the present number of cars on the road with DME would take a total yearly yield of six billion hectares of forest.

Other types of alternative agrofuels proposed to replace the oil we burn, like ethanol, demand too much arable land

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and water. Besides, producing ethanol from corn, or diesel from soy, directly conflicts with the production of food for the poorest people of the world.

What about the electrical car or the hydrogen engine? Neither hydrogen nor electricity is a source of energy. Rather they are bearers of energy that require an energy input of some kind. Today two thirds of the world's electricity is produced in coal fueled power plants.

All this means that the volume of transport, and especially of road transport, has to be adapted to a level that is sustainable in the long term. And that would be the end of the auto industry as we know it.

Finally, the economic crisis that is far from over will reshape the auto industry dramatically.

The argument that says uncompetitive auto production should be allowed to go to the wall is actually the worst from a social, practical and political point of view.

In Sweden industries have come and gone. In the 60s when the textile industry moved out, and in the 70s and 80s when the same thing happened to the shipyards, other sectors grew. These included the auto industry and especially public services. This "structural change" was the official policy of the unions and the Social Democratic Party.

Today, however, no other industries are on the rise and the public sector is facing cutbacks. In an auto-dependent economy like that of Sweden this will mean disaster.

Secondly, an industry like the car industry, is not a bunch of machines and buildings. Most of all it is an organisation of people. So when humanity is facing its toughest challenge so far – to change an economy and production that has been built on fossil energy for 250 years – we need all the resources we can use to do this. It would be a completely irresponsible waste to destroy an industrial complex that has been built and developed over almost a century.

The car industry has an expertise in logistics, production engineering, designing for production, and quality control that could be applied to any kind of production. And efficient mass production is exactly what we need if we want to replace the fossil economy. It makes complicated technical devices cheap and should be applied to production of wind turbines and other equipment for renewable energy production, of trams, trains and other vehicles and systems for a sustainable transport system.

Auto workers are also used to change and conversion. In the last decades new models have been introduced at an absurd speed with the result that retooling, rebuilding and retraining, have become part of everyday life.

There are historical precedents for converting industries. In the months after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese the US government prohibited the production of private cars and ordered the auto industry to change over to war production. Ford and the other producers obeyed (and earned many a good dollar) by applying their knowledge of mass production to tanks and bombers. The same thing happened in Britain.

To sum up: the auto industry is a fantastic and versatile operation that is not tied to making cars. It could play an important role in converting our societies into sustainable, carbon dioxide neutral, societies.

But ultimately the climate question is not about technology. It's about politics, that is, class struggle. And that is where the workers of the threatened industry come in.

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And this is where we, the workers of the threatened auto industry come in. We must unite and fight for our jobs but it's a very hard fight and almost impossible to win so we have to turn to society at large for support and intervention.

We have to argue that the corporate leaders who now are begging the state for help have forfeited their right to run the auto industry. The state should not subsidise their rule and continued destructive production but instead should nationalise the industry and convert it to create safe jobs and a production that can help us get out of the fossil economy. This would be a platform for a broad social alliance, both to save both the jobs and the planet.

Is it possible to build this alliance - to put forward demands for alternative production on the shop floor and upwards? If so, how?

The first step is to build workers' self-confidence by learning to fight collectively for anything at all. If we just talk about these grand schemes without engaging in everyday fights we will be seen as windbags building castles in the air.

A second step could be to produce concrete plans on how to convert different sectors.

In 1980 we had a referendum over nuclear power in Sweden and one of the most important things the environmental movement did was to put forward an Alternative Energy Plan showing in detail how nuclear power could be abolished and replaced with renewable energy. This was a very important tool in the campaign, in educating activists and giving people in the movement self confidence.

In May this year, environmentalists, citizen groups, researchers and union representatives from various European countries (including Bob Crow of the RMT in Britain) met in Cologne Germany to discuss a sustainable transportation system. The conference issued the Cologne Declaration against rail privatisation and for sustainable transport. A concrete plan, RailEurope2025 was put forward to transform European transport in 15 years in order to cut the CO2 emissions by 75%, thus cutting the total emissions by half. This kind of plan could be used by unions and other movements to build political pressure.

The third most important step would be to connect such alternative plans to the concrete work places, to production on a grass root level, as was attempted in the 70s in Britain at Lucas Aerospace. Even though that fight was defeated it had repercussions trough out the world, and still has.

In the late 70's there was a crisis in Sweden in shipbuilding, steel, and the last remnants of the textile industry. For a period "alternative production" became a hopeful buzzword, in quite broad layers. But almost all attempts to save jobs under this banner failed because to almost everyone "alternative production" meant "other profitable products".

The way we can use the idea of "alternative production" is to point out that we want to use our skills and can use it to produce socially useful an necessary products, regardless of whether they are profitable in the capitalist sense or not. This was the strength of the Lucas Plan.

Another appealing aspect of the Lucas experience was that is showed what can happen when workers step outside the daily treadmill. In the late 18th century Thomas Paine summed this up as follows:

Revolutions create genius and talent; but these events do no more than bring them forward. There is existing in man, a mass of sense lying in a dormant state, and which, unless something excites it to action, will descend with him, in that condition, to the grave.[2]

This year's Campaign against Climate Change trade union conference decided to form a committee to start the work for a plan for conversion, based on local participation. This is a way forward.

Notes

1 Achieving Sustainable Mobility: Everyday and Leisure-time Travel in the EU. S. 170 Erling Holden. Ashgate Publishing Ltd 2007

2 Rights of Man, II, 1792

This article is an extract from a speech at the Climate and Capitalism conference organised by Green Left and Socialist Resistance in London on 12 September 2009.