

Conversion and the auto industry : Jobs, Ecology, and Survival

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There have a lot of great analyses and interpretations of the world and I won't try to compete with them. I'll say a few words about changing the world.

I don't have any great success story to present, just a few thoughts about solving the old contradiction between jobs and the environment, in the special case of the auto industry, which I came up with as we were facing the dual crisis of economy and ecology.

It began in 2008, the year after Al Gore and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and climate change had been a worldwide top story. But with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the auto industry in free fall, the climate crisis quickly disappeared from the general discussion and even more so among us who work in the auto industry.

In the debate about the crisis ridden auto industry, two positions crystallized :

"Let it die !" Represented by the remnant of true believers of the invisible hand and creative destruction — a rapidly shrinking flock at the time.

"Support the industry !" Unions, Social Democrats, many governments — and naturally, the industry itself. They advocated subsidies of various kinds, from "Cash for clunkers" to the involuntary quasi-nationalization of GM and Chrysler. (And of course, sacrifices from us who work in the industry.)

Of course the "Let it die" position — notoriously articulated in the United States by Mitt Romney — was no alternative for us in the auto industry. It would have huge social implications in an economy where unemployment was rocketing, and especially in a auto dependent city like Gothenburg.

It would also be an enormous social waste. The auto industry is not just some buildings, robots and assembly lines. It's first and foremost an organization of people, who together make up an industrial machine built and perfected for nearly 100 years. If you take it apart it's no more an industrial machine than a car that's taken apart is a car.

Most important for us, of course, it would dissolve auto workers as a collective. I'll be back to this aspect.

If cars were a social necessity, I wouldn't per se be against the second position. Governments support all sorts of things like education, health care, culture, etc. The problem is that cars are not necessary. On the contrary the present transportation system, based on mass auto transit, is

completely unsustainable. It's a threat.

Transports, and primarily road transport, stand for a large and increasing share of the CO₂ emissions that threaten to push the globe over extremely dangerous thresholds. Transport is also a sector that is growing faster than the rest of the economy with globalization and just-in-time production.

The talk of the green, fuel-efficient car running on renewables is an illusion. I won't go into the details here. You can find them in my book if you know Swedish, and in a short version in my chapter "Cars, Crisis, Climate Change and Class Struggle" (in *Trade Unions in the Green Economy : Working for the Environment*, eds. Nora Rathzel and David Uzzell, foreword by Tim Jackson. Routledge : Earthscan 2013 — ed).

Basically, there is no way to substitute biofuels for fossil fuels at the present scale of consumption. And since two-thirds of electrical power comes from burning coal, oil or natural gas, the electric car is in most cases just a slightly more efficient fossil car.

The transportation system has to change in three ways :

- It has to change from private to public.
- It has to change from roads to rail.
- It has to be drastically reduced.

This of course has huge implications for the auto industry. It's not possible to keep pumping out 70 million units a year. Basically it's the end of the industry as we know it.

So facing the choice of seeing the jobs of my co-workers and myself go down the drain or demanding subsidies for pushing the earth further down the highway to hell, I opted for a "none of the above" alternative. Instead I've been trying to argue for conversion of the auto industrial complex as a way of saving both jobs and the planet.

At first it was more of a quick one-liner when journalists called and wanted me to comment on the crisis, but as I dug deeper I found that the case for conversion was very strong — that it's actually a viable strategy against both unemployment and climate change, both practically and politically.

The Practical Perspective

In the first place, to break free from the fossil economy it won't be enough to decide so (even though this decision itself is deplorably absent). It would also be necessary to replace material things that constitute the fossil fuel society, like the present means of transportation and energy production. This has to be done quickly and on a large scale.

Secondly, conversion of the auto industry is technically feasible. The auto industry is what comes to mind for most people when you say "mass production." They're almost synonymous. The assembly line was perfected there and it was mass production that changed the car from a luxury item into the main means of transportation in industrialized countries and the foremost symbol for mass consumption.

If mass production is the auto industry's first basic feature, conversion is the second. Ever since GM challenged and overtook Ford using a never-ending flow of new models as a method to market cars, the constant change of products has been a hallmark of the industry.

This has made the industry extremely versatile. It was no coincidence that the auto industry was the only branch of U.S. industry that was completely converted to the World War II effort. Only months after Pearl Harbor, the assembly lines of Detroit stopped producing private cars and started churning out tanks, planes and guns.

This knowledge, both of mass production and conversion, permeates the auto industry. Even at the lowest level, where I work, there is a deep but often tacit knowledge of the art of mass production and the methods that are used. And of no less importance, we are accustomed to change.

In short : The auto industry is not a coal mine. It's a flexible production machinery that society could use to produce almost any kind of technical equipment on a large scale. Send us the blueprints of socially useful stuff and we'll make it !

The Politics of Climate

But if these two practical reasons are good enough reasons in their own right not to let the auto industry die, but to use that amazing machine for the best of society, they are not even the most important reasons for why I think conversion is an important demand.

It's because the climate question is not about technology. At bottom it's about politics, relationship of forces, class struggle.

As the IPCC keeps rubbing in, the climate issue is not on its way to being resolved. Despite the increasingly alarming reports and the scientific consensus that we have to drastically cut CO₂ emissions, this isn't happening. On the contrary, in the 22 years since 192 governments signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, there has been a tremendous increase in greenhouse gas emissions that threatens the existence of mankind.

The reason is, of course, that reason isn't enough. The interests tied to the fossil fuel economy are so gigantic that the only possible solution, "keep the oil in the soil," would mean not only opposing the fundamental logic of the capitalist system, but also a head-on confrontation with the most powerful corporations of the world — telling them that they no longer can access the assets they build their value on, thus rendering them worthless.

However reasonable this may be from humanity's point of view, there's no way they're going to accept this. When it comes to the climate issue, as in so many other cases, reason stands against the power of mighty interests. And in a struggle between reason and power, power wins 100 times out of 100.

To stand a chance, reason has to be armed — armed with social power. And I think that auto workers' fight for jobs could be a part of arming reason, if we connect it to a conversion of the industry.

Instead of accepting the usual contradiction between jobs and environment, voluntarily delivering ourselves as hostages of the corporations, to fight for our jobs with a conversion strategy could create a focus point for a broad social movement for conversion of the whole society.

There are several arguments for this strategy. If we are to win anything at all we have to keep the collective together as much as we can. More traditional demands of replacement jobs and job training tend to move the initiative away from the shop floor and make it an issue between the individual workers and the government or some employer.

Conversion of an existing industry or plant, on the other hand, is something we can fight for together, as a solution for all, through our unions and together with other social movements. This is essential, both to be able to win and keep the momentum if we make progress in the fight, not leaving the initiative to state bureaucrats or the like. Think Lucas ! (The British Lucas Aerospace unions' alternative energy plan (1976) is described here :)

I don't think that this kind of process is possible on a local level alone. The auto-industrial complex is too big, and the things we could replace the present production with — like wind turbines or equipment for rail traffic — would need decisions and investments on a social level to guarantee the outlet.

But I think it's necessary that the fight has strong shop floor roots, both for political and practical reasons. After all, it's we who are running the machine today. Who would be better than we to lead and oversee the conversion ?

It's important to stress that I don't think that auto workers are the climate conscience of the world. In the spring of 2008, as the crisis was gaining steam, I took part in a debate on national Swedish radio, with, amongst others, the Minister for Enterprise and Energy Maud Olofsson. When I criticized the auto industry and its products and spoke in favor of conversion, the journalist asked me if I wasn't cutting off the branch I was sitting on.

We're not better or more inclined to make sacrifices for the common good than the next person. And that's not the question. I answered the journalist that it's the other way around : If we cling to the present unsustainable production and act as a support group for the owners of the industry (as our union leaders did at the time), that's cutting off the branch we're sitting on.

What I say is actually the opposite : With a strategy for conversion, we in the auto industry can actually be a crucial part of solving the most important task of our time — not by sacrificing ourselves but by fighting for our own immediate interests.

It's Up to Us

I'll finish with two things that I came to think about at the seminar earlier this morning. One speaker touched on the concept of "socially organized denial" that surrounds the climate issue. The problem is so immense that we tend to be unwilling to think of it at all, since we wouldn't know what to do about the whole thing.

Conversion of our jobs could be a way to put the issue inside everyday reality, within reach for workers, as opposed to looking to distant "world leaders" to fix things for us (which they won't do).

Another point that was mentioned was the idea of "the commons." And I think it's reasonable to argue that the auto industry, as any large organization, is a part of our common good. It is a part of society, it has grown out of society, and should be treated as a social asset.

What today is the corporate elite's business opportunity should be transformed into our common asset, as something that produces use values for society, not profit for private owners.

The powers that be have failed to solve the climate question. They are neither willing nor able to challenge the dominance of fossil capital and the accumulation of capital that is the driving force of both this economic system and global warming. The change has to come in confrontation with their power, from below.

Demonstrations and gatherings by activists in the streets are good, but not enough. The fight has to involve millions and millions of people in our everyday life. The case for conversion is about turning every possible workplace into a battleground against climate change.

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P.-S.

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