



# Making a good job of it

IN SHORT...  
WHAT DO WE  
MEAN BY  
PROSPERITY?

In the nuclear power debate, one of the issues is jobs. Advocates of nuclear power adopt a perspective that is useful to them: they focus on the jobs created by investment in energy production and on the energy needed to support jobs in industry. Opponents of nuclear power, by adopting a wider perspective, can provide what is in principle a much stronger argument: that investment in energy conservation measures and renewable energy technologies such as solar water and space heating generates more jobs at less cost than equivalent investment in centralised energy supply technologies.(1)

Of course, the forces backing centralised energy supply have much the greater control over actual investment decisions. At the moment this more than makes up for the inadequacy of their argument.

However, it is possible to take a wider perspective still and ask, do we really want more jobs? Shouldn't it be a goal to eliminate unnecessary and undesired labour? Why shouldn't there be efficient use of energy *and* efficient use of labour?

These issues are seldom raised by environmentalists(2) or others, perhaps because of the danger of seeming to be opposed to the interests of workers. Jobs and job security are so centrally important to many people that discussions treating fundamental assumptions often meet resistance.

In analysing strategies for moving towards a society based on the principles of equality, justice and local democracy and self-management, there are several fundamental issues: control by employers over workers on the job through work organisation and technology, wider social control mechanisms serving to inhibit challenges to established structures of political and economic power, and the general orientation of the production system to bolster these structures at the expense of serving human needs. These issues have been raised many times before by various critics and social movements. My aim here is to summarise some of the main points and then to focus on their implications for various strategies and demands centred around jobs and employment.

## Work organisation and the worker

There is a considerable literature concerning the way in which work organisation and technology is designed to ensure firm control by employers or managers over the worker.(3) Typically this involves high specialisation and fragmentation of work, prescribed sets of

actions and outputs, a reduction in skill requirements for many workers and strict hierarchies in which information transfer and decision-making take place.

Specialisation reduces the worker's capacity to understand the entire operation and reduces the workers' collective capacity to take over production. Prescribed actions reduce the worker's freedom to innovate and ability to question the mode of operations. Deskilling makes workers more interchangeable and hence more replaceable and also reduces wage levels. Formal hierarchies reflect the asymmetries of control over production and also serve to divide workers and provide means for individual rather than collective advancement.

The assembly line is the epitome of technology designed to control workers. However, the structuring of work for the purposes of control is much more widespread than factory work. For example, specialisation plays a vital role in reducing the potential for collective action by scientists and engineers.

The work organisation associated with nuclear power illustrates several of these points. The tasks of the different workers are highly structured by the nature of the technology itself: there are nuclear engineers who design power plants, trained operators, various maintenance workers and others such as security guards and part timers who work at routine tasks for a few days or hours until they absorb the maximum allowable radiation count. The great dangers to workers and the environment inherent in the nuclear power industry contribute to the difficulty in developing any sort of job rotation or enrichment, and severely reduce the potential for workers' control.

Nuclear technology in this respect may be contrasted with community-based small-scale renewable energy technologies using sun, wind, water and organic fuels. Because these technologies can be made relatively safe, low cost and small scale, there is at least theoretically a much greater potential for worker control of production systems. On the other hand, solar technology is also amenable to mass production techniques and centralised energy supply systems, and hence does not necessarily lead to changes in the work situation. So while solar technology lends itself more easily to self-management than nuclear technology, the actual relation of technology and the organisation of work depends on political and economic struggles.(4)

## Social control off the job

There are a number of social mechanisms by which the life situation of the worker (and the 'nonworker') is structured so as to inhibit collective action for social change.

(a) Consumerism. Acquisition of material goods as a fundamental goal of life is a widespread phenomenon in modern capitalist societies. It seems reasonable to argue that materialist attitudes and strivings serve to displace and substitute for fundamentally satisfying goals such as self-management.(5)

(b) Escapes. The avenues for escape from the paramount reality of work and life are becoming more and more available and acceptable. The most noteworthy escapes are TV(6), drugs, sex and gambling. Each of these has obvious ties with consumerism.

(c) Infrastructure. The infrastructure of present reality ranges from transport systems to professional control over services. The infrastructure of physical facilities, established knowledge, skills and routines is oppressive because it makes it much more difficult, operationally and conceptually, to move towards alternatives.

Nuclear power is again an example of a technology which lends itself to reduction in freedom off the job. Its product, electricity produced at a central source remote from the user, is an ideal base for the promotion of plug-in appliances and hence for consumerism that perpetuates the separation of producer and consumer. And the infrastructure of the electricity grid, electricity based heating, transport and other vital services, and the enormous investment in the nuclear fuel cycle, represent an obstacle to moving towards alternatives. Small-scale energy technologies on the contrary offer an alternative to consumerism by providing the potential for more widespread involvement in determining patterns of energy supply and use — although again the link between technology and social structure is one of tendency and potential rather than cause and effect.

## Orientation of the production system

Much of the production system and the associated infrastructure is not geared to serve human needs, but instead serves the whims of elites, satisfies manufactured demand, fosters harmful addictions such as smoking and promotes inappropriate technologies such as Concorde. Translated into the realm of employment, this means

Table 1 Some standard goals of the labour movement and their strengths and limitations

Goal	Primary actors/audience	Strengths	Limitations
Centralised economic planning using existing production apparatus	Marxist parties; working class	Promises better allocation of resources; exposes irrationalities of present economic system	Leaves open the question of the form of technology and of occupational roles; centralised planning presumably depends on expert planners who are open to cooption as part of a ruling bureaucracy; the experience of communist economies
A larger fraction of the social product (money) diverted from profit to workers	Unions; worker oriented organisations	Promises reduced exploitation; highlights economic inequalities	No focus on the social control of production or on what products are produced; financial gains are susceptible to being rolled back by operations of corporations and governments
National expenditure shifted from corporations, military and wealthy to public sectors of health, education and welfare	General public; health, education and welfare professionals	Highlights operation of economy to serve special interests and not human needs	Ignores the critique of professionalism(8) and ignores alternative solutions based on structural change to stop the social production of ill health, ignorance and other problems such as crime and mental illness.

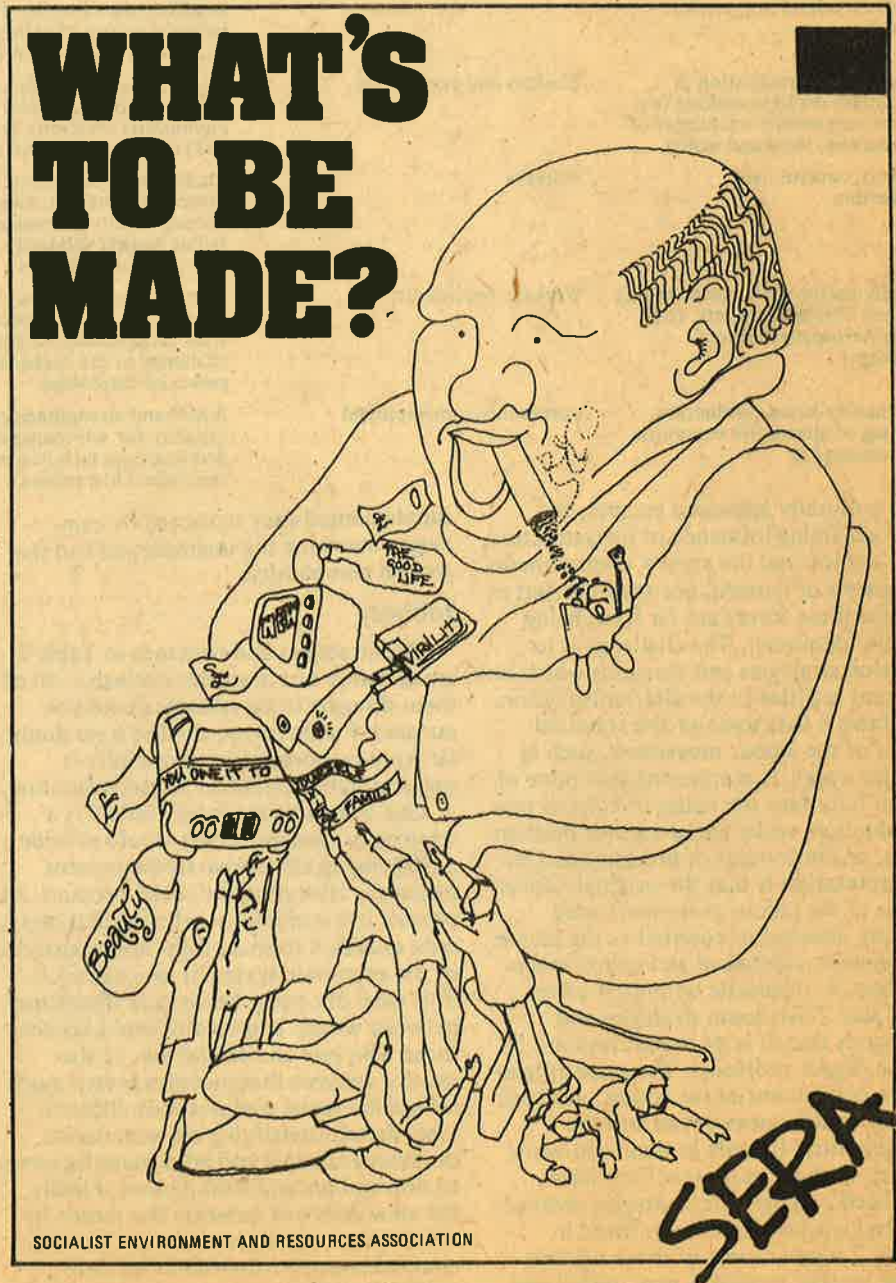
that most present jobs are partly or completely useless or positively harmful from the point of view of a rational, peaceful, self-managed society. In such a society the need for labour in the present sense would be greatly reduced.

- Less military production means fewer military posts.
- Less planned obsolescence means less production and less work.
- Transport organised around bicycles, planned communities and public transport means a greatly reduced automotive, oil and construction industries.
- Non-hierarchical social relations mean elimination of many bureaucracies.
- An ecologically based social ethic means fewer jobs in garbage collection and artificial fertiliser production.
- An end to consumerism as a way of life means a drastic cut in advertising work.
- An end to chemicalisation of the environment and promotion of a better diet and more exercise means a greatly reduced need for doctors and pharmaceutical companies.

Most of those who sympathise with this perspective realise that to look at these issues in terms of present style jobs is misleading. There would certainly be plenty to do in a radically reformed society, ranging from organic gardening to repairing bicycles to 'being with people' (code for an altered vision of what is now education, social work, etc). Indeed, Schumacher has argued that it would be better to have to spend *more* time providing many of the necessities of life.(7)

**Radical Strategies**

This is all very well, but the present reality is that most people must work in a current style job, with limited freedom and flexibility. It all sounds pretty formidable: work organisation and technology designed for control over workers, compensating concessions of consumerism



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Table 2 Some strategies and demands centred around jobs, with strengths and limitations

Strategy/demand	Primary actors/audience	Strengths	Limitations
Shorter work week; job sharing; option to work less for less pay*	Workers (especially the well paid)	Reduces strong ties of worker to job; is the most obvious solution to unemployment that is opposed by employers	Union and privileged worker opposition to less pay for less work; lack of benefits to lower paid workers
Inverted salary structures (pay inversely proportional to the desirability of job)	Lower paid workers	Fundamental questioning of the distribution of the social product	Opposition by virtually all influential (i.e. well paid) people; conflict with established value systems
Organised action by the unemployed in social movements (e.g. squatting, workers' control, women's movement)	Unemployed and supporters	Strengthens social movements; builds experience in self help; makes unemployment a threat to the establishment rather than to workers	Ease with which the unemployed are demoralised or coopted (e.g. by employment of leaders)
Those with jobs contributing part of their wages to support social activists (otherwise unemployed)	Unemployed and supporters	Strengthens social movements in a permanent manner; challenges the dominance of the individual reward system	Dominance of the individual reward system (few people would consider sacrificing part of <i>their</i> money)
Campaigns for/against technologies which lend themselves to control by/over workers (e.g. nuclear power)	Workers, community	Wide appeal of opposition on environmental and other grounds; heightened awareness of the political nature of technology; challenge to the cult of expertise	Potential for the restriction of the issue to middle class concerns such as environmental amenity (11); cooption by establishment(4).
Community participation in production decision-making (e.g. worker-community exchanges of information, ideas and skills)	Workers and community	Demystification of the content of jobs; basis for greater worker-community solidarity for future worker and social issue struggles	No built-in concern for alternative work or production patterns
Workers; control over production	Workers	Challenges fundamental basis of present production; demonstrates the superfluity of management; builds worker solidarity, co-operation and abilities	Attention not focussed on what is produced
Socially useful production, ending planned obsolescence, etc. (e.g. Lucas Aerospace workers' campaign)	Workers, community	Points out orientation of present production to serve special interests; wide acceptability of demand; challenge to the decision-making power of employers	Attention not always focussed on who controls production
Community-based production, building of alternative economic institutions(12)	Community, unemployed	Builds and strengthens people's capacity for self-management; demonstrates lack of a need for centralised hierarchies	Isolation from wider struggles; no direct tackling of existing institutions

and culturally approved escapes, the overwhelming influence of infrastructure, and the job and life style commitments to useless or harmful occupations. But of course these forces are far from being totally dominant. The challenge is to develop strategies and demands which link current realities to the alternative vision.

Table 1 lists some of the standard goals of the labour movement, such as higher wages. It is apparent that none of them fully face the issues of control over production, wider social control mechanisms, or the content of production. One interpretation is that the original radical goals of the labour movement were mostly diverted or coopted as the labour movement, capitalism and communism evolved in a dialectic with each other.

Table 2 lists some strategies and demands that at least in part respond to these deeper problems. There are at least three constituencies for action: workers, the officially unemployed and the 'community' (people in their non-work roles). In the past most efforts have focussed on goals and strategies centred around workers. The items listed in Table 2 suggest some of the ways that these worker strategies may usefully be

supplemented (not replaced) by campaigns involving the unemployed and the general community.

### Jobbery

The strategies and demands in Table 2 are certainly not mutually exclusive: all of them thought to be valuable should be pursued. Furthermore, the list is no doubt far from comprehensive; hopefully it suggests some directions for consideration.

One thing missing from Table 2 is a strategy or demand which would provide a challenging alternative to the present means for allocating the social product. At present it is commonly believed that one is only qualified to share fully in the products of the economic system if one has a job. This view of course ignores the distinction between wealth and income and between those who buy and sell labour. It also usually assumes that incomes pretty much reflect the social usefulness of different jobs, thereby certifying the superiority of divorce lawyers and arms manufacturers to dishwashers and fruit pickers. Finally, the view does not question the means by which jobs are created and structured by employers and by the economic and political system.

This link between jobs (at least as presently constituted) and social worth needs to be challenged. Those working toward self-managed socially useful production need to propose alternative mechanisms for distributing the social product and develop strategies for transferring legitimacy to these mechanisms.

Back in the jobs and energy debate, the question to be faced by environmentalists is the choice between issues. Which should be emphasised: the job creating potential of conservation and renewable energy technologies, or the link between nuclear power and centralised economic and political power, or the increased potential for community decision-making with decentralised local energy technologies, or other issues? The answer perhaps is that all of these need to be emphasised. There is a need to emphasise jobs because jobs are an important reality. But there is also a need to emphasise issues of worker and community control and of alternative means and content of production, because otherwise current job structures will be used to justify continuation of the current political and economic system.

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