Global Issues

From Cars to Tanks: German Labour's Reverse Conversion Problem

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The Roots of Eco-Social Conversion Movements

In 1976, workers at the British aviation and defence company Lucas Aerospace published the Lucas Plan. The plan outlined how the company and its employees could transition from producing military goods to producing "socially useful" civilian goods (Smith, 2014). The plan was the workers' direct and active response to management's announcement of a company restructuring combined with mass layoffs. The workers came up with innovative ideas, such as products related to renewable energy (Kaiser, 2023). Ultimately, however, the plan failed due to a lack of support from management, politicians, and labour union leaders (Smith, 2014). Nevertheless, the case still serves as a prime example of an eco-social conversion movement. Such conversions aim to reorganise production under the control of workers and trade union representatives, shifting labour and production towards sustainable products and methods. The term is also often associated with converting past military production and sites for civilian use (Ötsch & Bartelheimer, 2026). If they can overcome economic obstacles, eco-social conversions can be an effective way to achieve just transitions.

However, fifty years later, that vision has not become any more tangible. I argue that what we see within several German companies right now can even be described as "reverse conversions." Rather than a democratic, bottom-up process that changes industry production to focus on sustainable or socially useful goods, developments follow classic market logic. Management decides to sell or change production to focus on arms and defence systems. This shift is a direct move towards producing the very goods that traditional conversion movements aimed to get away from. While developments are rapid, discussions about this issue are mostly limited to debates within the media, civil society, and the political left. Therefore, I highlight some of the most recent cases in Germany and describe the challenging situation that workers and labour unions are facing. Above all, I want other scholars to join the discussion and develop strategies to empower workers and unions in these conversion processes.

Today's Dark Turn: Increasing Militarisation Leads to "Reverse Conversions"

In the decades since the Lucas Plan, the debate over eco-social conversions has seemed to die down rather than evolve. Yet within the climate movement, a "labour turn" is emerging, with activists increasingly forming alliances with workers to promote a just transition agenda that combines good work and climate protection (Kalt, 2021). For example, at a Bosch factory in

Munich's Berg am Laim district, climate activists and workers joined forces to develop ideas for converting the factory's production. They launched a petition and came up with alternative product ideas, including medical technology products (Kaiser, 2023). Unfortunately, the plant is still scheduled to close in 2027. While this case can be seen as a comeback of eco-social conversion movements, the renewed debate about conversions is taking place under very difficult circumstances. German companies are under pressure to change due to economic stagnation and rising production costs driven by international crises (Grömling, 2025). This is particularly evident in the country's struggling automotive industry. Consequently, recent developments in Germany's industrial sectors provide useful case studies for understanding reverse conversions, whereby production shifts towards defence rather than away from it.

Three cases serve as perfect examples of these developments: Görlitz, Berlin, and Osnabrück. Last year, the French-German defence company KNDS purchased an Alstom factory in Görlitz, changing its production from trains to tank parts. KNDS has hired many former Alstom employees and plans to increase production in Görlitz (Groß, 2026). This marks a significant shift away from producing goods that are crucial for transforming the transport sector towards manufacturing military products. A similar shift took place in Berlin this year, but not through the sale of a production site to a defence company, rather through a management decision to convert production to be more profitable. Rheinmetall has decided to shift production from car parts to artillery ammunition. The company plans to exit its automotive division almost entirely and convert suitable sites, such as the Berlin plant, for defence production (Pallokat, 2026). Finally, developments are still unfolding in Osnabrück. The Volkswagen (VW) factory there is set to cease production in mid-2027, and management is currently in discussions with several defence companies regarding a possible sale of the plant. Earlier this year, Rheinmetall clarified that it would not purchase the factory, but talks with the Israeli company Rafael Advanced Defense Systems are reportedly ongoing (Pitel et al., 2026). As no decision has yet been made, the situation in Osnabrück offers workers, activists, and unions a real opportunity to influence the outcome, which is why I return to it in more detail below.

In addition to these examples, it is likely that more cases will follow as VW, Germany's biggest car company, reportedly considers shutting down four German factories and cutting up to 100,000 jobs (Amann & Steitz, 2026). Meanwhile, the European defence sector is booming (SIPRI, 2026). These developments raise questions about the ability of eco-social conversion movements to compete with a growing defence sector whose exports are at least partly tied to ongoing international wars and the genocide in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2025). This leaves workers and unions facing a genuine moral dilemma between job security and potential complicity.

Reactions of Workers and Labour Unions

The positions that workers and labour unions take in these reverse conversions are diverse and sometimes contradictory. In a difficult economic situation, the prospect of unemployment threatens manufacturing workers. Therefore, accepting these conversions just to maintain stable employment may seem like the only way to provide for themselves and their families. This may explain why protests against Görlitz's conversion from train to tank production were largely led by political parties, rather than by the affected workers, who were mainly concerned about keeping their jobs (Muschenich, 2025). The acquisition process was overseen and supported by the respective labour union, IG Metall (Alstom, 2025).

In the case of Berlin, IG Metall recently released a statement highlighting its contradictory position. The union views job preservation as a positive development and describes the societal debate on arms production as important. IG Metall also claims to support principles of peace and disarmament, but ultimately, it supports the conversion process to ammunition production (IG Metall Berlin, 2026). The conversion continues to be accompanied by widespread public protests. However, there appears to be no strong opposition from within the workforce.

The Case of Osnabrück: How Could an Eco-Social Conversion Be Successful?

In Osnabrück, climate activists are driving the current developments, which is a pattern also seen in other recent eco-social conversion movements. They are organising protests against converting to defence production and are hosting open discussion forums from which IG Metall officials are largely absent (Morgenthaler, 2026).

A study by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, the foundation of the German party Die Linke, and ROBIN WOOD, an environmental NGO, analysed which other products could be produced in the factory (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung & ROBIN WOOD, 2026). The plant's workers have already produced several small batches of vehicles, including electric on-demand shuttle buses that could support public transport infrastructure. The authors argue that these products are necessary for managing a sustainable transport transformation in Germany. Notably, electric buses that are accessible to people with disabilities are not widely available and could be a socially useful product to produce in Osnabrück. However, the authors clarify that increased state investment in public transportation and regional economic cooperation would be necessary for such a production conversion to be economically feasible (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung & ROBIN WOOD, 2026). Nevertheless, developments in Osnabrück demonstrate the factors that both enable and hinder eco-social conversions.

Previous eco-social conversion movements have shown that many workers want to be involved in production decisions. In principle, workers seem to value the idea of producing goods that contribute to climate protection or broader societal benefits (Kaiser, 2023; Morgenthaler, 2026). In the case of Osnabrück, the involved activist collective reports that management has banned workers from contact with the press and civil society organisations (Aktionsnetzwerk "Zukunftswerk Osnabrück", n.d.). This may further increase workers' reluctance to engage with the activists or voice any opposition (Morgenthaler, 2026). But eco-social conversion movements and just transitions in general rely on participation. The skills of workers are versatile and a study of the Austrian automotive sector has shown that workers are certain that they could produce a range of different products (Pichler et al., 2021). Therefore, there need to be ways for workers to contribute their ideas and influence production in a meaningful way.

Additionally, the developments in Germany do not happen by chance. They coincide with significant increases in public defence spending (Hage & Hesse, 2025). A successful transport transformation may require even larger sums of money, but the public budget does not currently align with these needs (Agora Verkehrswende und Dezernat Zukunft, 2025). Therefore, government spending decisions signal which products are needed and influence what is economically feasible.

Labour unions face difficult decisions in these conversion processes. In Germany's corporatist system, which is traditionally based on collective bargaining, social movement unionism has not gained much popularity (Dörre, 2019). However, the call for just transitions necessitates that

unions broaden their political agenda and form new coalitions, which may initially seem unusual. Historically, labour union officials in the Global North have not generally supported eco-social conversions or environmental groups (Pichler et al., 2021; Smith, 2014). Nevertheless, coalitions between labour and environmental groups have emerged in the German public transport sector (Lucht & Liebig, 2023), and such coalitions have positively influenced just transition policies in other European countries (Mandelli, 2026). Notably, the only public study on alternative production ideas in Osnabrück comes from the political left and climate activists. While it is understandable that labour unions might fear losing members by taking on more radical and transformative approaches, doing so could also strengthen their ability to form alliances with a broader range of civil society actors (Pichler et al., 2021). Therefore, to do more than issue public statements supporting peace and disarmament, labour unions must actively participate in alliances developing alternative production plans for eco-social conversion. Fifty years after the workforce at Lucas Aerospace demonstrated what workers could envision when given the opportunity to design production processes themselves, German unions must ensure that this opportunity is not conceded to management and market logic by default.

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