

The employment benefits of *not* replacing Trident

Steven Schofield argues that investing the billions earmarked for Trident replacement in alternative sectors would more than offset the job losses in the nuclear weapons sector.

Although the New Labour leadership secured a parliamentary vote in favour of a replacement for Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system, mainly by relying on the Conservatives to counteract a backbench revolt, opposition remains strong. The Scottish National Party administration's determination to prevent Trident warheads being transported through Scotland, and continued campaigns led by peace groups and trade unions against nuclear weapons modernisation, reflect a widespread popular opinion that the UK should be working towards nuclear disarmament rather than nuclear rearmament.

Recently, in support of these efforts, UNISON sponsored research by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) on the employment consequences of a decision to cancel Trident's replacement¹. The nuclear weapons lobby has always used the spectre of unemployment to mobilise support, particularly in areas where nuclear weapons production is concentrated. However, the report concludes that the threat is greatly exaggerated, and that instead of a multi-billion pound diversion of scarce technological and industrial resources into nuclear modernisation, the government could support a major civil reinvestment programme in areas like renewable energy. This policy would generate tens of thousands of jobs and more than compensate for the run-down and closure of the nuclear weapons network.

Nuclear weapons employment is concentrated in a few locations: the BAE Systems shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, West Cumbria, where the Trident submarines are constructed; the Devonport Dockyard in Plymouth, recently acquired by Babcock Naval Services, where the submarines undergo major refits; the Clyde Submarine Base at Faslane and Coulport, also run by Babcock Naval Services, responsible for basic maintenance of the submarines and nuclear warheads; and the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Aldermaston, run by a consortium of Lockheed Martin, BNFL and Serco, for the design, production and testing (and ultimate decommissioning) of warheads.

Under these private-sector corporations, all sites have seen both public investment running into billions of pounds to modernise facilities and a

rationalisation of employment since the construction of the first Trident submarines in the late 1980s and 1990s. For example, the workforce at the Barrow shipyard was reduced from 12,500 in 1990 to 3,400 in 2006. Overall employment in the nuclear network has declined from 26,300 to 11,300, a fall of 57%, reflecting the general restructuring of UK arms-related employment during the same period, down from 510,000 to 260,000.

Various estimates have been made for the construction costs of the system to replace Trident, due to become operational in the mid-2020s. The final bill for the original Trident programme was £12.1 billion, which would translate to £15.2 billion in today's money, allowing for inflation. However, costs on major arms projects tend to rise for each successive generation, and the total will probably be higher, in the region of £18-25 billion². For a workforce of 11,000, and even allowing for indirect employment generated at the subcontractor level and through expenditure in the local economies, this represents a very poor rate of employment generation compared to similar investment in the civil sector.

The fundamental argument in the CND/UNISON report is that expenditure on nuclear weapons represents a significant economic opportunity cost. The real security threats facing us in the 21st century are global warming and the accumulating and inter-related environmental catastrophes that threaten our industrial way of life, yet the priorities for government R&D and investment continue to reflect a perverse Cold War militarism³.

The billions currently devoted to nuclear weapons could be invested in ways that help redefine national and international security and embrace these new challenges. For example, the UK can make a significant contribution to reduced carbon emissions by a rapid expansion of renewable energy power. Energy reviews from the mid-1970s onwards have recognised the massive potential for offshore wind and wave power to satisfy up to 50% of the UK's electricity generation requirements⁴. A multi-billion pound programme of research and investment would help to reduce the UK's carbon emissions, as a contribution to national and international targets, and also guarantee domestic energy production at a time of increasing vulnerability to disruptions and price fluctuations in oil, gas, and uranium supplies.



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The employment potential of sectors such as renewable energy is far greater than that of a new generation of Trident submarines

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Denmark took the decision to reject nuclear power in the 1970s and embarked on a programme of renewable energy production that now provides 25% of its domestic requirements through wind power, as well as becoming the leading exporter of wind turbines in an industry worth over £2 billion a year. A similar investment by our government in offshore wind and wave power could generate 25-30,000 jobs in these new industries by the end of the next decade, more than compensating for the loss of nuclear weapons work.

The lack of a similar strategy for renewable energy since the 1970s is little short of a national economic disaster. Whilst there have been some welcome recent increases in research funding on renewables, the UK starts from such a low base that pressure is growing for a replacement programme of nuclear power stations, which can only divert resources from renewables and further complicate nuclear proliferation issues.

It is now twenty years since the publication by the Barrow Alternative Employment Committee (BAEC) of a report entitled *Oceans of Work*. BAEC was a pioneering trade union group based at the Barrow shipyard that argued for just such a programme of civil marine R&D and renewable energy production to end the dependency of the yard on ballistic missile submarine construction⁵. However, the report was never given serious consideration by the company and the government focused its energy research funding on the nuclear black holes of fast-breeder reactors and fusion power, neither of which have made any practical contribution to energy supply. There is also strong evidence that the nuclear establishment seriously damaged the prospects for renewables by influencing the setting of unrealistic energy production targets for the first generation of wind and wave power prototypes, in order to maintain the nuclear monopoly over government research funds⁶.

It is not too late to change course. If we treat the threat from global warming as a national and international emergency, requiring the mobilisation of skills and resources on a scale not previously seen except during wartime, then cancelling Trident can be seen for what it really is: not an economic threat, but an opportunity. No better signal could be given that the UK intends to play a pivotal role in the pursuit of international disarmament and sustainable economic development.

Dr Steven Schofield is co-founder of the Project on Demilitarisation and has published a range of reports on arms conversion and disarmament.

References

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2. Hartley (2006) suggests a 10% rise in real terms each year for military equipment. Hartley K. (2006). *The economics of UK nuclear weapons policy*. International Affairs, vol. 82, no. 4., pp. 675-84.
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5. Barrow Alternative Employment Committee (1987). *Oceans of work: the case for non-military R&D and production at VSEL, Barrow*.
6. Schofield S. (2007). *Oceans of work: arms conversion revisited*. BASIC. <http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/beyondtrident/oceans.pdf>

A big "thank you"

10 ...to all those who responded so generously to SGR's 15th anniversary appeal for funds. We are delighted to announce that as of 18 December the amount raised had reached a grand total of £5,840 which is only £160 short of our target!

Thank you also to all of you who responded to our earlier appeal and to all those who make individual or regular donations throughout the year. Not only do your donations help SGR's work

directly; they also demonstrate to other potential funders the high level of commitment of our members. Your support is vital in keeping the organisation going.

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