

Strike for a sustainable climate

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

13 November 2019

On 20 September this year, there was a co-ordinated series of demonstrations around the world held under the umbrella of “School Strike for Climate”. At least 6 million people participated, with protests across 4,500 locations in 150 countries. It was followed the next week by another 2 million people protesting in 2,400 locations. In Australia, protests were attended by about 300,000 people – amounting to over 1% of the population.

These protests mark a watershed in global politics around climate change. In key countries, including Australia, huge numbers of people are angry about the impending climate disaster and willing to do something about it. Capitalist governments, however, are taking inadequate action and some are even denying there is a problem.

It will take more than protest to avert the danger of global temperature rises of 3–40 C, which would cause the death of billions and possibly the end of industrial civilisation – and most people know it.

What is urgently necessary now is to turn protest into resistance, through turning the school strikes into workers’ strikes. In Australia, the next global school strike day should be the occasion for mass co-ordinated strikes by workers from as many industries as possible, with the aim of building towards a general strike.

Such strikes, of course, will be illegal. But this is such a broad and urgent issue that we now have a golden opportunity to smash the “Fair” Work Act and its vicious anti-union provisions to smithereens. Workers who have had strikes banned by the “Fair” Work Commission, or been injuncted off picket lines, or fallen foul of other rules that are designed to prevent us exercising our economic power have a vital interest in joining the next climate strike.

To achieve mass workers’ action over climate change, however, requires two things. Firstly, it requires a political platform that appeals to workers both morally and materially. The climate movement needs to get away from the moralistic approaches some organisations and prominent figures have. We’re not “all in this together” and we don’t all share responsibility for the unsustainability built into capitalist society. Instead, we need to put a Just Transition at the heart of our program. Workers and communities currently reliant on unsustainable industries have to own the transition plans and therefore have to generate them themselves. No worker and no community should be left behind. Naturally, this will need resources, which will have to be found with social equity. So forget about neo-liberal ideas like a carbon price. The rich got us into this hole and they’ll have to pay to get us out.

Secondly, organising these strikes requires a sufficiently committed political force. The union officials will have to decide which side they are on: a Just Transition to a sustainable, zero carbon future — or the electoral fortunes of the ALP. We need a rank and file upsurge in the unions that will push past officials that stand against us. And the prize will be not just a barrier in the way of the destruction of habitability on our planet. It will also be the ability of workers and their unions to strike on daily issues of wages, conditions and employer behaviour.

The general strike for a Just Transition will be the beginning, but not the end of the matter. We will open up a debate about the dimensions and shape of the Just Transition. As the struggle progresses, more workers will come to realise that the only Just Transition is a transition away from capitalism. Two facts will drive this. First more people will see the existing capitalist class is so invested in fossil fuels that it has to be swept aside for humanity to achieve sustainability. The understanding will also emerge that eternal growth is the ideology of the cancer cell. Only by abolishing capitalism can we disconnect living standards from resource consumption and adopt a circular zero waste economy.

The struggle for a planet we can continue to live on is the struggle for libertarian communism. And it will be won or lost in the workplace.

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