

Striking back to stop the war on our planet

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On New Year's Day 2020, the Navy ship HMAS Choules left Sydney Harbour for a rescue mission to Mallacoota. Images of families huddled on the beach on this Victorian coastal town, as a firestorm closed in, became emblematic of the sense of existential crisis that gripped much of Australia.

Long suffered by people at the margins, the climate crisis arrived in terrifying ways for the Australian mainstream. For many, this has been a call to action. Tens of thousands joined snap 'climate emergency' protests in Sydney. Opinion polls show a surge of support for action to cut carbon emissions.

Another deployment of a naval ship in the second week of the New Year, however, gave a glimpse of just how powerful the forces stacked against meaningful climate action really are. The HMAS Toowoomba was sent by Prime Minister Morrison to join a US military build-up off the coast of Iran. The Sydney Morning Herald reported the frigate would help 'a US-led coalition guard against oil supplies being threatened by Iran' in the Straits of Hormuz.

Twenty-five per cent of the global oil trade and one-third of natural gas passes through these straits each year. These are industries that will need to be phased out within a decade to maintain any semblance of stability in the global climate system. The world's dominant imperialist powers, however, have consistently proved their commitment to wage war and slaughter human beings on a mass scale to maintain control of fossil fuels and their movement across the world.

While the climate crisis may well cost us the earth, global capitalism has far too much to lose to walk away from fossil fuels. On the list of the world's ten biggest corporations, six are oil and gas companies and two are car companies. Corporations have current claims on fuel reserves that, if burnt, would create five times the carbon emissions that scientists tell us will push the world beyond 2 degrees of warming. In the two years following the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2016, ostensibly a commitment by the world's major powers to limit warming to 1.5 degrees, finance corporations lent in excess of two trillion dollars to the fossil fuel industry.

In these circumstances, there is no consumer choice we can make or workplace or community 'sustainability plan' we can draw up that will have any meaningful impact on the ecocidal plans that have already been budgeted for multinational corporations, backed to the hilt by military forces. The only chance we have to defend a liveable planet is to build a mass movement capable of grinding their system to a halt.

Stop work to stop warming

While the history of warfare shows us how ruthless capitalists will be to defend their wealth and power, it also gives us a glimpse of the kind of popular mobilisation that can successfully challenge them. This year marks the 50th anniversary of one such social movement that had a decisive impact on Australian politics – the massive Moratorium marches against the Vietnam War that began in 1970.

Through the 1960s, smaller actions by a radical minority had turned around public opinion from the initial overwhelming support for the war. The heroic armed resistance of Vietnamese people, led by the National Liberation Front, had destroyed the myth of US and allied invincibility. As increasing numbers of allied soldiers were killed, this fuelled a political crisis in Australia.

The Moratoriums in 1970 and '71 crystallised this growing opposition into huge displays of popular power. They were major demonstrations held on a Friday. This meant that workers needed to organise strike action to join with the marches. Years of patient work by activists had built up anti-war committees within different unions. In Victoria, twenty-six 'rebel unions' split with the Victorian Trades Hall and called openly for a mutiny of Australian troops in Vietnam. Across Australia, numerous state and regional trades and labour councils supported to the call to 'stop work to stop the war'.

The first Moratorium on 8 May 1970 saw 100,000 people march in Melbourne alone and 100,000 more across the country. Railway workshops, ports, construction sites, schools, universities and many factories were shut down, hitting the profits of big companies and posing the threat of escalating strike action unless demands were met.

It was in response to the growing Moratorium movement that the Australian government began significant troop withdrawals and ended conscription for Vietnam in 1971. The movement also helped shift society decisively to the left, leading to the election of the Whitlam government who withdrew Australian troops entirely in 1972.

The 'School Strike for Climate' movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg in Sweden in 2018, exploded across the world in 2019, putting the question of strike action to win broader social change back on the map. For the Global Climate Strike on 20 September 2019, high school students took the important step of explicitly asking workers to join them on the streets. In Australia, School Strike for Climate (SS4C) raised the demand of a 'just transition' for workers in the fossil fuel industry and pointed to the hundreds of thousands of jobs that could be created if there was proper public investment in new, low-emissions industries.

Large numbers of workers took breaks and turned out on September 20, but we only saw a glimpse of actual strike action that shut down businesses. In some cases, workers were already in Enterprise Bargaining negotiations, the only time when industrial action is potentially 'legal' in Australia. In Sydney, Maritime Union of

Australia (MUA) wharfies negotiating with Hutchison Ports walked off the job on September 20 and spoke from the platform of the mass rally. In Melbourne, fifty workers from Fenler Dunlop, who produce conveyor belts for the mining industry, were on strike too for better working conditions and joined the climate strike.

These small but impactful actions build on a proud history in Australia of unions using industrial power to stop environmental destruction. The Australian Council of Trade Unions put bans on oil drilling operations at Noonkhanbah in the Pilbara in 1980 in solidarity with Yungngora people trying to defend their lands. The Builders Labourers' Federation in Sydney waged a 'green bans' campaign over many years in the 1970s that saved parkland, bushland and working class housing.

Before COVID lockdowns hit Australia, there had been serious preparations for major stop work protests in Sydney. On May 1, in both 2018 and 2019 in Sydney, the CFMEU construction division and the Maritime Union of Australia walked off the job in defiance of draconian laws that prohibit strike action. These protests were exclusively focussed on changing industrial laws and winning more rights for workers. For May 1 2020 however, these unions were planning another strike rally, this time also connected to the School Strike for Climate Movement, who endorsed the planned day of action. Along with the ETU and Plumbers Union, the CFMEU and MUA had pledged to walk-off for "workers' rights – social justice – climate action". The march was to include demands for massive public investment to build a 100 per cent renewable energy system and support for Aboriginal communities fighting to stop fossil fuel developments on their lands. Unfortunately, the early stages of the lock down forced the action to be called off. A smaller "car convoy" action on May 1 went ahead, surrounding the Liberal Party Headquarters in Sydney, while participants listened to a 2SER radio broadcast featuring interviews with unionists and climate strikers.

Two weeks later, on May 15, the high school students at SS4C led a national online 'strike for climate'. There was a very broad endorsement of this event by trade unions. The extent to which the possibilities opened up by these new alliances and commitments will translate into more widespread stop work action depends on all of us. We face a legal system that has outlawed the exercise of workers' power. Laws that protect the climate criminals by making political strike action illegal, such as Australia's misnamed 'Fair Work Act', will have to be broken.

It is workers that keep the wheels of capitalism turning, and workers that can grind them to a halt. In moments like these, you can see the outlines of a new, revolutionary society, a socialist society where we decide collectively how to use our labour to look after each other and the earth, rather than destroy it for the profits of a few. Building escalating strikes for climate justice is the most urgent task facing the growing movement trying to stop the war on our planet, and lay the basis for a lasting peace.