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Articles

Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and the History of the Revolution
George M. Yule, Richard Pinner

Samuel Johnson, Lessons of Socialist Reformations
Michael O'Brien, The Fall of the Empire and the Road to Socialism

Kenn F. Surin, The Multiculturalism of Gender Equality
John Henry, Marx for the 21st Century

Simon Willmetts, Engels's Primary Thought
Thomas Hill, Questioning Progress: Strategy from the Climate South

Jack Conroy Ward, The Influence of Cuban Mass Political Participation
Tony Williams, James Beckett's Liberalism

David S. Fleming, On John Berger
S. Linnell, Being Justice Without Politics

Joseph C. Kinnick, Reflections on Karl Marx
Karl David, Power, Greed, Freedom

Poems

Julian Storr, A Traveller in the Rain
Book Reviews 86–87

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Striking Fossil Capital: Towards a Theory of the Climate Strike

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Striking Fossil Capital: Towards a Theory of the Climate Strike

Elias König

Introduction

The climate strike is a special kind of strike. It does not usually involve the collective withdrawal of wage labour, neither does it require union membership, or picketing. Rarely does it carry the scent of teargas, or the sound of class struggle. Nonetheless, the climate strike has emerged as the defining form of action of the arguably biggest social movement dedicated to climate justice ever.¹ Following the formation of the first *Fridays for Future* climate strike group in 2018, it took the climate strike movement only a couple of months to outperform any previous other attempt at climate justice organizing. At the height its first mobilization cycle in 2019, it was able to mobilize millions of students and sympathizers to participate in several globally coordinated climate strikes.²

This unprecedented potential for mobilization should spark our theoretical interest – what is it that sets the climate strike apart from other forms of climate justice organizing? What were the factors that enabled the movement’s rapid growth? At the same time, the limitations of the climate strike as a form of action are becoming increasingly apparent – most saliently, its inability to force governments and companies to *actually* cut emissions. Here, the climate strike’s nominal kinship with other radical strike movements – labour, feminist, anti-racist and otherwise – points to a still unrealized radical

1. This assessment admittedly carries a certain nomenclatural bias when one considers that many social movements that effectively contribute to creating a more climate-just world do not actively consider themselves to be climate justice movements, an argument I consider in the latter part of this article.
2. It is hard, of course, to generalize the historiography of the movement across different contexts. As one *Fridays for Future* comrade rightly pointed out, in many non-European countries, the movement may be said to have reached its first peak only the following years. I return to this point later in the section on “Climate Justice Strikes? A Movement Response.”

potential: Could the climate strike movement incorporate elements from and enter alliances with other strike-based movements? What does it even mean to *strike* in an age of climate crisis?

A relevant theory of the climate strike must therefore address both analytical and strategic concerns. Analytically, it ought to illuminate the specific character of the climate strike in its current form, that is, primarily as a school strike. Strategically, it should offer a reflection upon the ways in which the climate strike movement could overcome its given limitations and examine the potential of the climate strike beyond the “school strike” format. Accordingly, in the first part of this article, I analyze the climate strike in its present form. I suggest theorizing the school climate strike as a *generational reproduction strike* and highlight two important aspects that distinguish the climate strike from other formats of organizing for climate justice: its appeal to the material interests of a generational subject (the *youth*); and its targeting of institutions of social reproduction in which capital accumulation is embedded (the *school* and the *family*). In contrast to a well-organized labour strike, however, climate strikes have not yet impacted the vital processes of production or distribution themselves. As a result, political “concessions” to the climate strike movement largely have been limited to rhetorical commitments by national and local governments rather than material adjustments to the fossil economy.³ Further, the movement’s composition and political praxis have rendered it amenable to co-optation by *green capital*, or capital fractions committed to a mere “ecological” update of fossil capitalism. Consequently, much of the political momentum created by the climate strike movement has been absorbed into reformist projects of ecological modernization that leave the structural roots of the climate crisis untouched.

Given this strategic dilemma, the second part of this article theorizes the climate strike as a strike against fossil capital. To this end, I propose an alternative, *long history* of the climate strike. I argue that by virtue of their common opposition to fossil capital other instances of progressive strike action, such as the those practiced by labour, feminist, or anti-racist and anti-colonial movements can also be considered forms of climate strikes, too. I end by examining some of the ways in which placing the climate strike into the longer history of radical

3. Malm defines the fossil economy as “an economy of self-sustaining growth predicated on the growing consumption of fossil fuels, and therefore generating a sustained growth in emissions of carbon dioxide.” Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016), 14.

strike movements may be generative of new alliances and strategic interpretations of the climate strike frame.

The school climate strike: chronicle of a movement's meteoric rise

Journalistic accounts of the climate strike movement tend to focus on the story of Greta Thunberg, Swedish high school student and by far the most prominent face of the climate strike movement. In August 2018, Thunberg, then 15 years old, began cutting classes and protesting in front of the Swedish parliament to draw attention to the climate crisis.⁴ Thunberg carried with her a sign reading “Skolstrejk för klimatet” – “school strike for the climate.” Following three weeks of continuous protests, Thunberg and her friends Mina, Edit, Eira, Tindra, and Morriagan announced the founding of a new group, *Fridays for Future*, on September 7, 2018. The newly formed group announced that they would continue their school strike every Friday until the Swedish government and other governments would pursue policies compatible with limiting global heating to 1.5°C as determined in the 2015 Paris Agreement. In her speech, which was held in English and broadcast online, Thunberg called on children around the world to join her and begin striking in their respective countries.⁵

There had been earlier attempts at organizing climate strikes, such as during the first week of the Paris climate talks in 2015, when students across the globe skipped class calling for the phase-out of fossil fuels and support for the victims of climate change.⁶ However, none of the previous actions had morphed into a sustained and globally organized movement comparable to that which soon grew out of the *Fridays for Future* network in Stockholm. Within weeks, likeminded students and supporters set up climate strike committees in several countries. On November 30, 2018, the first major national climate strike brought together more than 10,000 students in faraway Australia, followed by large-scale strikes in Belgium and Switzerland.⁷ In

4. David Crouch, “The Swedish 15-year-old who’s cutting class to fight the climate crisis,” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/sep/01/swedish-15-year-old-cutting-class-to-fight-the-climate-crisis>

5. David Fopp, Isabelle Axelsson and Loukina Tille, *Gemeinsam für die Zukunft – Fridays for Future und Scientists for Future* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021), 31.

6. Joelle Thomas, “Climate Change and Millennials: The Future Is in Our Hands,” *Scientific American*, September 1, 2018. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/climate-change-and-millennials-the-future-is-in-our-hands/>

7. The organization of the first large-scale national climate strike in Australia seems to have heavily relied on already existing climate networks that had formed in reaction

December, Thunberg delivered a speech on behalf of the grassroots network *Climate Justice Now!* at the UN Climate Summit in Katowice, Poland. Thunberg did not mince her words in addressing the political class:

We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again.

We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time.

We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people.⁸

The speech achieved viral success after being shared online by Bernie Sanders and other prominent figures. In the ensuing months, Thunberg and other *Fridays for Future* leadership figures repeatedly took the stage at high-level political meetings to draw attention to their message, such as at the *World Economic Forum* in Davos in January 2019 and at the European Parliament in Strasbourg in March of the same year. The months following the Katowice Summit were also a crucial moment for grassroots organizing, as students and supporters began setting up regular structures to coordinate their actions on at a local and national level. Within a matter of weeks, these organizing efforts culminated in the first global climate strike on March 15, 2019. According to the organizers' own numbers, the day saw more than one million students skip school in more than over 2,000 concerted actions in over 125 countries.⁹ The success of the mobilization firmly established the school climate strike as the dominant form of action of the global climate justice movement. It also marked the end of a decade of strategic decentralization, which had followed the failure of the mobilizations around the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009. As a mode of organizing, the climate strike allowed the climate justice movement once again to synchronize its actions on a global scale, while at the

to the government's announcement to approve the construction a new destructive coal mine project in Queensland. The decision by these actors to call a "climate strike" appears as a rather spontaneous decision. Cf. Naaman Zhou, "Climate change strike: thousands of school students protest across Australia," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/30/climate-change-strike-thousands-of-students-to-join-national-protest>

8. John Sutter and Lawrence Davidson, "Teen tells climate negotiators they aren't mature enough," *CNN*, December 17, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/16/world/greta-thunberg-cop24/index.html>
9. Jessica Glenza, Alan Evans, Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Naaman Zhou, "Climate strikes held around the world - as it happened," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/live/2019/mar/15/climate-strikes-2019-live-latest-climate-change-global-warming>

same time offering enough flexibility to allow for vastly different local interpretations of the same format.

Beyond the charisma and eloquence of its leaders, the rapid spread of the climate strike movement was enabled by a broader set of material conditions. In the words of a manifesto published by the UK Student Climate Network, “Greta Thunberg may have been the spark, but we’re the wildfire and we’re fuelled by the necessity for action.”¹⁰ Across the world, the 2010s had seen a surge in awareness about the climate crisis, especially among young people.¹¹ In the years following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, media coverage of the climate crisis had risen to an all-time high.¹² The years between 2014 and 2019 had also been the hottest on record, triggering a rise in the number of climate-related events and natural disasters, including “enormous heatwaves in the US, Europe and India, freakishly hot temperatures in the Arctic, and deadly wildfires from Australia to California to Greece.”¹³ Meanwhile, the scientific community had issued ever more stern warnings about the dangers of unmitigated global heating, most notably the IPCC’s *Fifth Assessment Report* in 2014 and the subsequent *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C* in 2018. Lastly, the widespread reach of social media provided the high school students with a tool to communicate and organize globally that had been unavailable to previous generations.

Across the world, then, Thunberg’s call to action was taken up by a well-connected generation of students that had come to understand the climate crisis not a distant prospect, but as a direct threat to their own lives. Prior to the climate strikes, climate justice movements in the Global North had often struggled to gain mass support by appealing

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10. UK Student Climate Network, “A manifesto for tackling the climate change crisis,” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/15/uk-student-climate-network-manifesto-declare-emergency>
 11. Moira Fagan and Christine Huang, “A look at how people around the world view climate change,” Pew Research Center, April 18, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/18/a-look-at-how-people-around-the-world-view-climate-change/>
 12. Andreas Schmidt, Ana Ivanova and Mike S. Schäfer, “Media Attention for Climate Change around the World: A Comparative Analysis of Newspaper Coverage in 27 Countries,” *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 5 (October 2013): 1233–1248, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.07.020>.
 13. Oliver Milman, “Last decade was Earth’s hottest on record as climate crisis accelerates,” *The Guardian*, August 12, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/12/hottest-decade-climate-crisis-2019>

primarily to the moral conscience of informed citizens.¹⁴ *Fridays for Future* transcended this moralistic framing in its messaging, putting the focus on the existential dimension of the climate crisis for young people around the globe. As such, it was able to morph the so often abstractly talked about “future generations” into a viable, globally organized political subject actively articulating and defending its material interest. It is this concreteness that made the logic behind the school climate strike so simple and compelling: Why bother going to school, if there will be no habitable planet to inherit?

The climate strike as a generational reproduction strike

The actual interpretation of the climate strike frame varied greatly across different national contexts. Whereas in some countries students walked out of school or collectively skipped class, elsewhere climate strikes resembled more conventional demonstrations, or included other forms of action such as bike trips, die-ins, and actions within schools. Regardless of their particular format, none of the climate strikes involved the withdrawal of labour power itself, nor did they otherwise intervene in the spheres of production and distribution. Even as six million people took to the streets during the largest climate strike in September 2019, fossil fuel extraction and deforestation remained largely unaffected. Nevertheless, political leaders felt compelled to react to and at least offer nominal concessions to the movement. Initially, political reactions were often dismissive, with German chancellor Angela Merkel suggesting the climate strikes were to be understood as a form of “hybrid warfare” driven by outside actors, and Australia’s Scott Morrison telling students to be “less activist.”¹⁵ Later, the dominant approach became to appease the moderate factions of the burgeoning movement with a string of nominal concessions, while at the same time toughening laws criminalizing more radical forms of climate justice activism. Perhaps the

14. This seems to be the case at least for the big climate campaigns in the Global North, a such as being Bill McKibben’s “Do the Math Tour” (<https://math.350.org/>). It is not to imply there haven’t been any previous climate justice movements rooted in a more material politics – a prime example would be the *Pacific Climate Warriors*, a climate justice movement from the Pacific island states that staged a spectacular canoe blockade of the world’s largest coal export port in Newcastle, Australia, in 2014.
15. Janosch Delcker, “Merkel backs climate protests after talk of hybrid warfare,” *Politico*, February 16, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-climate-protests-russia-questions-whos-fueling-student-climate-movement/>

most prominent tangible political outcome of the 2019 climate strike mobilizations was thus a wave of “climate emergency” declarations by governments, businesses, universities, and other entities.¹⁶ While these measures may rightly be dismissed as rhetorical manoeuvres, they nevertheless still speak to the relative success of the climate strikes in eliciting political responses in comparison with previous climate justice campaigns.

This raises two important questions: What were the mechanisms by which the school strikers were able to exercise their collective bargaining power vis-à-vis some of the most powerful capitalist states on earth? And conversely, why did these actors choose to respond to the climate strikes in the way they did?

Most accounts of the movement are curiously vague in regard to these questions. *Fridays for Future’s* very own website merely declares: “When a small part of the population is really engaged for change, change occurs.”¹⁷ Not only is this statement obviously false, given that the bare existence of even a large share population “engaged for change” does not by necessity precipitate political action (the failure of the Iraq war demonstrations in 2003 is a case in point). It also neglects *when* and *how* change is supposed to occur. Unfortunately, most empirical research about the movement has so far only contributed to this state of strategic obfuscation. In his investigation of *Fridays for Future’s Disruptive Potential*, for instance, Jens Marquardt asserts that “... social movements can generate substantial forces to push for change and demand reforms by putting pressure on existing industries and foster social experiments.”¹⁸ How exactly the protests are supposed to put *pressure* on governments and businesses, however, is not examined. Similarly, a comparative study of *Fridays for Future* protests across 13 European cities by Mattias Wahlström and colleagues finds that a significant share of the participants are motivated by the desire to “pressure politicians to make things change.”¹⁹ Instead of scrutinizing the mechanics

16. “Climate emergency: New hope, or just empty words?” *Deutsche Welle*, July 9, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/climate-emergency-new-hope-or-just-empty-words/a-49523833>

17. Fridays for Future, “How to Strike,” Web. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/take-action/how-to-strike/>

18. Jens Marquardt, “Fridays for Future’s Disruptive Potential: An Inconvenient Youth Between Moderate and Radical Ideas,” *Frontiers in Communication* (July 2020). <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00048/full>

19. Mattias Wahlström, Piotr Kocyba, Michiel De Vydt and Joost de Moor, eds., *Protest for a future: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European cities* (2019).

of change implied in this statement, the notion that a mass scale demonstration somehow “puts pressure” onto decision-makers is once again taken for granted by both participants and researchers.

In one refreshing exception to this theoretical indolence, the *Transnational Social Strike Platform* and others have proposed reading the climate strike as a *social strike*.²⁰ As a concept, the social strike represents the attempt to broaden the definition of “strike” to include the withdrawal forms of labour that are less obviously linked to capital accumulation, including “migrants strikes, feminist strikes and coordinated strikes in logistical warehouses.”²¹ According to Lorenzo Feltrin of the UK-based collective *Plan C* (a member of the Transnational Social Strike Collective):

... a strike occurs when workers withdraw their labour to pressure private employers or the state to make concessions. If we understand work as exclusively waged employment, then a strike only happens when waged employees perform a workplace-based suspension of production. However, if we adopt a broader definition of work, encompassing all activities – waged and unwaged, productive and reproductive – that are subordinated in both obvious and hidden ways to the accumulation of capital via profit-making, then work is not contained only in formal workplaces but is also diffused throughout society. It is done within households and communities (for a moment, just think of all the cooking, cleaning and caring that we call reproductive labour); through the means of communication (the production of data, emotions, entertainment, ideas that are captured and sold for profit by the internet giants); in schools (the formation of a labour-power adequate to the needs of the economy); etc. The social strike then, refers to a withdrawal of all kinds of labour, including labour in its most socially diffused forms.²²

Consequently, Feltrin reads the climate school strike primarily as the “withdrawal of labour by ‘labour power in formation,’ i.e. the students” – an analysis shared even by some climate strike activists themselves.²³ In Wollongong, Australia, for instance, two organizers explicitly categorized the 2019 climate strikes as *social strikes*:

https://eprints.keele.ac.uk/6571/7/20190709_Protest%20for%20a%20future_GCS%20Descriptive%20Report.pdf

20. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 150.
21. Transnational Social Strike Platform, “What is Transnational Social Strike?,” Web. <https://www.transnational-strike.info/about/>
22. Plan C and Lorenzo Feltrin, “The Climate Strikes & the Social Strike: Working-Class Environmentalism and Social Reproduction,” *Plan C*, June 18, 2019. <https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/the-climate-strikes-the-social-strike-working-class-environmentalism-and-social-reproduction/>
23. *Ibid.*

As a strategy, the social strike reflects the fact that capital depends on our leisure time, our domestic activity, and our social spaces, not only to circulate goods and services, but also to create relationships suitable for capitalism to continue to exist.²⁴

The Wollongong organizers, Feltrin, and other proponents of the social strike are correct to point out that the disruptive potential of the climate strike lies at least partly in its targeting of one of the central institutions of social reproduction – the school. In this regard, their analysis echoes the interventions of scholars of *Social Reproduction Theory* (SRT) like Susan Ferguson, who have emphasized to the central role that the school plays in disciplining the future labour force and in channelling the creativity and playfulness of children into market-compatible behaviours. Children’s “excess” of sensuality and imagination, Ferguson writes,

... poses a threat to the given order of social reproduction – as was evident in the inflated reformer and popular discourse about street “urchins” and “layabouts.” Supervised playgrounds, summer camps, youth organizations, and schooling are all “solutions” to this supposed “problem.” Meanwhile, those presumed to be the most sensual and “dirty” children (depending on the context, this could include girls, and black, Indigenous, working-class, and poor children, who therefore stoke the greatest fears) invite more severe forms of social control such as reform schools, prison, and other forms of discipline that deny them the opportunity to play and pursue pleasure.²⁵

In withdrawing themselves from school, the school strikers temporarily refuse to be disciplined in line with the expectations of a society they deem to function fundamentally against their generational interest. They instead create a temporary, alternative space of social reproduction – one less dominated by imperatives of individual achievement and more by communal care and collaboration, including care for the earth.

While consonant with viewing the school and other institutions of social reproduction as legitimate and important sites for strike-based struggle, SRT theorists also articulate an important theoretical critique of the *social strike* framing. Grounded in a more classically Marxist analysis of capitalism, SRT theorists insist it is still important to

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24. Revolts Now, “Strike, Blockade, Shut it Down! Reflections on the Wollongong Global Climate Strike,” October 23, 2019. <https://revoltsnow.wordpress.com/2019/10/23/strike-blockade-shut-it-down-reflections-on-the-wollongong-global-climate-strike/>
 25. Susan Ferguson, “Children, Childhood and Capitalism” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 127.

distinguish between *productive* and *unproductive* labour, the former being tied to the production of commodities:

Capitalistically “productive” labour, according to Marx, is that which directly creates value. Value is determined in the process of producing goods and services for exchange (or commodities). In other words, it is created when the product of labour is destined for sale on the market.²⁶

In regard to the climate strike, this differentiation allows to account for the fact that the climate strike’s impact has largely been limited to the discursive realm. The fact that Saudi Aramco, Shell, and Sinopec are able to go about their destructive business largely undeterred even on the day of a well-organized school strike with millions of young participants *does* make a difference. The point here, of course, is not to relegate the importance of struggles in the realm of social reproduction, but rather to encourage a kind of mass movement building across production and reproduction that directly and effectively challenges capital accumulation, while at the same time opening up new spaces of social reproduction beyond the logic of capital.²⁷ For now, it is in this spirit that I analyze the school strike for climate not just as a social strike, but specifically as a social reproduction strike.

Indeed, empirically speaking, the lever by which the school climate strikes have exerted pressure within their respective societies seems not necessarily to be only and primarily through the withdrawal of “labour power in formation,” as in Feltrin’s words. Perhaps even more significant appears to be the disruption of the school’s other systemic functions, such as relieving parents of their childcare responsibilities and enabling them to participate in the labour market. Consider the way in which the more recent widespread school closures prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the economies of many countries. In most cases, evidence shows that the shutting of schools significantly interfered with the reproduction of the labour force, since parents had to adapt their own working routine to the increased requirements of childcare and education. According to one study, the school closures in the United States reduced parents’ weekly work hours between 11 and 15 percent.²⁸ Another study by

26. Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 123.

27. *Ibid.*, 130.

28. Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes, Marina Morales, Miriam Marcén and Almudena Sevilla, “COVID-19 School Closures and Parental Labour Supply in the United States,” *Institute of Labour Economics*, Discussion Paper Series No. 13827, October 2020. <https://ftp.iza.org/dp13827.pdf>

Titan Alon and colleagues finds similarly grave impacts across six countries, pointing out that these impacts are often heavily gendered and that women's work hours are disproportionately affected by this trend.²⁹ If these numbers provide any indication of the importance of the school for the functionality of the broader labour market, school strikes do harbor a significant disruptive potential precisely through their indirect impact on capitalistically productive labour. While one-day strikes have proven to be politically manageable in most instances, a possible extension of the strike length, as discussed in some cities, could have caused severe interruptions.³⁰

Akin to a kind of generational token strike, then, the school strike for climate represents a direct threat to the ruling class: If you do not take our plight seriously, we are prepared and able to shake up the social relations that sustain your present lifestyles. On an individual level, it carries this conflict right into the heart of capitalist reproductive social organization, the nuclear family. Over dinner, when watching the news, or in debating the absence of classmates, parents or guardians are forced to engage with their children's plight. The school strike directly confronts them directly with their own complicity in a system that jeopardizes the safety and wellbeing of their children.

Further, the climate strikes pose a long-term threat: What if a considerable share of the future workforce were indeed to grow up suspicious of and frustrated with the fossil capitalist status quo, and go on to withdraw from, or even actively resist the dominant modes of social organization? This is a scenario not to be taken lightly by the more far-sighted sections of the ruling class, especially in countries of the Global North whose skewed demographic profiles place a heavy economic burden onto the younger generations.

Putting together the insights that the relative success of the climate strike is rooted in the successful mobilization of a generational subject –

29. Titan Alon, Sena Coskun, Matthias Doepke, David Koll and Michèle Tertiltto, "From Mancession to Shecession: Women's Employment in Regular and Pandemic Recessions," *National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 28632*, 2021. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28632/w28632.pdf

Other studies, however, are more cautious in their assessment of the impact of school closures. See Dullien, Sebastian; Kohlrausch, Bettina, "Dissecting the COVID19 supply shock: Which role did school closures play?" *IMK working paper*, February 2021. https://www.boeckler.de/en/faust-detail.htm?sync_id=HBS-007949

30. In Germany, for instance, the climate strikes gave rise to about a dozen *climate camps*, which constitute more permanent occupations and serve as bases for political action. See "Klimacamps (Climate Camps)" Fridays for Future. <https://fridaysforfuture.de/klimacamps/>

the *youth* – as well as in its potential to target reproductive social relations – in particular those institutionalized in the *school* and the *family* – in which capital accumulation is embedded, we may characterize the climate school strike as a *generational reproduction strike*. This analysis proves helpful in explaining how the movement was able to create the pressure necessary to achieve some political concessions. There is, however, another factor that deserves our critical attention.

Class as a limiting factor

Although the *youth* – abstract and universal – is the climate strike’s pronounced generational subject, the movement’s trajectory has largely been shaped by a much narrower urban upper- and middle-class positionality.³¹ This is also reflected in the composition of the movement itself. For instance, the 2019 climate strikes in Germany (among the largest in the world) were disproportionately attended by upper middle class, *white* and female demographics.³² A comparative study of the September 2019 climate strike in nineteen cities around the world comes to similar conclusions, finding that “a large proportion of young people participating in the September strikes had parents who had studied at university level.”³³ Following the first successful global climate strike, the *for Future* ecosystem soon grew to include organizations such as the *Parents for Future*, *Scientists for Future*, *Lawyers for Future*, *Architects for Future* – less so the mechanics, cleaners or domestic workers for future.

The endorsement of the climate strikes by an educated urban middle and upper-class milieu increasingly concerned about the climate crisis (and often organized in “green” NGOs, businesses, and political parties) became a central factor in facilitating the rise of the movement. As David Fopp, a professor at Stockholm University and an early participant in the climate strikes recalls, the first Fridays for

31. In a broader sense, this bias is already implicit in the figure of the “student” and the logic of the school strike, which should not obscure the fact that many children around the world reproduce capitalism as actual workers.

32. Moritz Sommer, Dieter Rucht, Sebastian Haunss and Sabrina Zajak, “Fridays for Future. Profil, Entstehung und Perspektiven der Protestbewegung in Deutschland,” *Institut für Protest- und Bewegungsforschung*, working paper, 2019. https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/fridays_for_future_studie_ipb.pdf

33. Joost de Moor, Katrin Uba, Mattias Wahlström, Magnus Wennerhag and Michiel De Vydt, “Protest for a future II: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 20-27 September, 2019, in 19 cities around the world,” 2020. retrieved from: https://protestinstitut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190709_Protest-for-a-future_GCS-Descriptive-Report.pdf

Future chapter in Sweden often used the local Greenpeace office as a meeting point.³⁴ Fopp also stresses the importance of established environmentalist networks to the early movement-building process:

While the young people sit leaning against the wall and enjoy the still warm autumn sun, some of them along with some adults like Janine, Torbjörn, Anders, Ivan and Andrea start writing to all the Swedish communities; more precisely the people within the grassroots movements and climate activism they have contacts with from before, and also keep a meticulous lookout for anything that stirs on the net. In this, "KlimatSverige" is of great help, "Climate Sweden." It is the union of all environmental organizations.³⁵

As the movement grew, the school strikers from Stockholm were supported in their travels, logistics, and communication by established NGOs such as 350.org und GSCC. In other countries, bourgeois NGOs played an even bigger role, such as in Germany, where BUND, WWF, 350, Avaaz, and Greenpeace were prominently involved in supporting the organization and growth of the climate strike movement.

Thus far, then, the climate strike movement had found its primary support base in what one might call the *green bourgeoisie* – sections of the urban upper and middle classes worried about the prospect of a full-fledged climate and ecological crisis. This middle class-bias to a great extent accounts for movement's particular habitus, its language and aesthetics. It does not, however, explain much more than that. A solar engineer, a trained botanist, a software programmer, and her daughter attending the same climate strike may all well be classified as members of a burgeoning green bourgeoisie, yet the personal motivations and circumstances of their attendance could greatly differ.

Class only becomes useful in explaining the political trajectory of the movement when we analyze it not as an individual attribute but as a structure – that is, when we move from the considering the role of the *green bourgeoisie* to that of *green capital*.³⁶ But why would any section of the capital throw its weight behind a movement calling for strike action and *system change*?

Shades of capital

The climate strike movement's relationship to capital becomes crucial when considering that the climate and ecological crisis are

34. David Fopp, Axelsson and Tille, *Zukunft*, 42.

35. *Ibid.*, 50.

36. Erik Olin Wright, *Understanding Class* (New York: Verso, 2015), 4–11.

predicated upon and driven by *fossil capital*. Fossil capital, here, denotes both a specific social relationship between capital, labour, and fossil fuels, as well as the process of fossil-fuelled capital accumulation itself, both of which have become constitutive of broader capitalist social relations since the 19th century. According to Andreas Malm:

At a certain stage in the historical development of capital, fossil fuels become a necessary material substratum for the production of surplus-value. But they are not merely necessary as leather for boots, raw cotton for cotton textiles or iron ore for machines: they are utilised across the spectrum of commodity production as the material that sets it in physical motion. Other sources of mechanical energy are pushed to the fringes, while capital expands in leaps and bounds, energised by fossil fuels. These have now become the general lever for surplus-value production.³⁷

In other words, any rapid transition away from fossil fuels would pose a significant threat to the stability of the capitalist system. Abandoning most existing fossil fuel infrastructure – a necessary component of any meaningful response to the climate crisis – would expectedly translate into stranded assets, a grave accumulation crisis, and the unraveling of many of the social relations that sustain the economic and political status quo. Most seriously affected by this transition would be *gray capital*, capital that is directly invested in the extraction of fossil fuels and related industries (such as automobile and heavy industries). While gray capital constitutes the most powerful class fraction within currently existing fossil capitalism, its very existence would be threatened by a rapid transition away from fossil fuels.³⁸ Faced with this prospect, gray capital has remained staunchly committed to various forms of climate denial and delay for decades. It has been extraordinarily successful with this strategy: As of today, most anthropogenic carbon in the atmosphere has been emitted *after* the in-house scientists of Exxon Mobil and Shell first alerted their bosses to the dangers of global heating more than a half a century ago. Even in the decades to come, the exploration and exploitation of fossil fuels is poised to continue just as if the news of the climate crisis had long been debunked as a hoax. On the inverse, however, this also means that any climate movement aspiring effectively address to climate crisis would have to find a way to directly confront gray capital, whether through pressuring states to rein in the power of the fossil fuel industry or otherwise.

37. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 200.

38. Cf. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (New York: Verso, 1978), 84.

On first sight, *green capital* seems to be an ally in this struggle. It represents those sections of capital who have more to lose than to gain from upholding the gray capitalist status quo. Rising prices for food, energy, and other raw materials, the rise in frequency of natural disasters, or migration flows and violent conflicts give an indication of the gravity with which an escalating climate crisis could impact capital accumulation and the convenience of life even in the otherwise sheltered realm of suburbia. Faced with this prospect, green capital is committed to various projects and proposals that center the modernization of capitalism and the mitigation of the worst effects of the climate crisis. Such green modernization would entail abandoning certain sectors of the fossil-fuel based gray economy and the opening up of new “greener” areas of accumulation to sustain profits. As Lasse Thiele observes:

Tragically, from a macro-capitalist perspective, a Green Economy scenario may still be preferable to the accelerated doomsday trajectory of “gray” capitalism – but “progressive” factions of the transnational capitalist class, including the GE [Green Economy] institutions, have been unable to effect a passive revolution in the shape of thoroughgoing ecological modernization against the resistance of the “gray” factions.³⁹

Its effective opposition to *gray* capital has made the climate strike movement an attractive strategic ally for green capital. There is little doubt, however, that even the “ecological” modernization of capitalism as envisioned by the prophets of a greener capitalism would have devastating consequences for people and planet. Not only has the actually existing *green economy* been spectacularly unsuccessful in mitigating dangerous global heating. Even more concerning, as Thiele has argued, it tends to take the form of an *economy of additionality* – adding to rather than substituting the fossil economy’s dirty base.⁴⁰ Its policies of choice – carbon trading and carbon pricing – in effect amount to attempts at *greening* fossil capitalism rather than replacing it. While the interests of green capital may superficially seem to converge with the climate strike movement’s cause, its voiced opposition to gray capital is not to be confused with an actual opposition to fossil capitalism itself. To the contrary, the rhetoric of ecological modernization espoused by many green parties, NGOs, and businesses may even help to lend legitimacy to continued fossil fuel extraction

39. Lasse Thiele, “The Prospects of ‘Green’ Capitalism. Systemic Accumulation and Cost Re-Externalizations in the Green Economy,” Free University of Berlin, 336. <https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/handle/fub188/27924>

40. Thiele, Green Capitalism, 216.

by deeming it necessary to guarantee a capital-friendly “transition.” The marketing of fossil gas as a “transition fuel” epitomizes this dynamic. In the context of the real existing fossil economy, then, green capital turns out to be yet another shade of grey, no matter how progressive it may present itself.

The climate strike movement’s unresolved relationship to green capital has contributed greatly to its inability to force governments to implement policies that would result in immediate and tangible emissions reductions (let alone bringing about a climate revolution that would abolish fossil capitalism). Such reductions would in the short term only be imaginable by way of some form of economic contraction and thus neither in the interest of *gray*, nor of *green* capital. Instead, the movement’s most significant political outcome, intended or not, has been a strengthening of the forces of ecological modernization who are envisioning a long-term, capital-friendly transition away from fossil fuels that would be inevitably associated with new forms of externalization and appropriation. As Thiele observes with reference to the case of Germany:

When social movements become effective, it does not mean that they get what they want. Thus, the climate movement initially enabled – partly involuntarily – the political forces that want to modernize capitalism ecologically to prevail over those that cling to the fossil. Instead of radical socio-ecological systemic change and global climate justice, such modernization is now likely to take place within a location-nationalist framework: Germany is to become the “green” export world champion. Social and ecological costs will continue to be shifted to other regions of the world, where, for example, resources for “green” technologies will be promoted. The climate justice movement as the midwife of “green” capitalism? This may sound ironic, but it is an expected development given the current balance of power. On this changed playing field, the arguments continue, with an open outcome. Every technological transformation promoted by the new government will produce winners and losers and will mean conflicts – at home and globally.⁴¹

In countries such as Germany, the climate movement proved instrumental in bolstering popular approval for a reformist agenda of ecological modernization. Elsewhere, it has produced even more contradictory political results. In some regions, the movement’s middle-class habitus and its perceived links to business interests made it easy for gray capital to pit it against the fossil working class and mobilize the latter for its own reactionary agenda. Such has been

41. Lasse Thiele, “Sicherlich ohne Klimagerechtigkeit,” *Neues Deutschland*, October 7, 2021. <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1157384.klimagerechtigkeit-sicherlich-ohne-klimagerechtigkeit.html>

the case in Australia, which saw some of the world's largest climate strikes in 2019. That same year, the incumbent right-wing extractivist coalition government was able to secure a surprise victory in the country's federal election. Key to the electoral success of Scott Morrison's coalition was a strong voter turnout in the state of Queensland, where residents expressed fears that more stringent climate policy could endanger employment prospects and jobs, such as those promised by projects such as the planned Adani-run Carmichael coalmine.⁴²

In summary, while the material backing by green capital has been vital to the climate strike movement's rapid rise, it is also key in understanding its significant limitations. As of December 2021, three years after the first climate strike, carbon emissions are projected to reach a new all-time high in 2023.⁴³ Much of the political momentum created by Fridays for Future has been absorbed into agendas of a green capitalist ecological modernization or even strengthened the reactionary forces of gray capital. The COVID-19 pandemic, itself a by-product of capitalist socio-ecological relations, put an end to the first mobilization cycle. Whether *Fridays for Future* and its allies will be more effective in pressing for radical social and ecological transformation required to address the climate and ecological crisis in the future will therefore be to a great extent determined its ability to effectively challenge fossil capitalism in all its shades.

Climate justice strikes? A movement response

Perhaps in an attempt to distance itself from some of the blatantly uneven projects of green capitalist modernization it involuntarily helped to boost, *Fridays for Future* has recently placed an increased emphasis on the importance of climate justice in its official communications. This is accompanied by a verbal radicalization – reflected in a more concretely anti-imperialist, feminist, and anti-capitalist rhetoric – that has largely been the result of interventions by climate strikers from some of the most affected people and areas (MAPA): Why had their peers in the Global North chosen to call their group Fridays for Future when the climate crisis was already shaping the present of so many people and communities on this planet? How does one stage a

42. Matt McDonald, "Election 2019: What happened to the climate change vote we heard about?" *ABC*, May 20, 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-20/what-happened-to-the-climate-change-vote/11128128>

43. Damian Carrington, "'Reality check': Global CO2 emissions shooting back to record levels," *The Guardian*, Nov 4., 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/04/reality-check-global-co2-emissions-shooting-back-to-record-levels>

school strike in a community or country where some children are not even able to attend school? What about countries and communities in which Fridays are considered religious holidays? Discussions about racial justice, colonial structures in the movement were further spurred by the global #BlackLivesMatter protests in 2020 and the painful reality of vaccine apartheid throughout the pandemic.

It was in response to these internal and external criticisms that activists from the Global South/MAPA took over the official communication channels of the *Fridays for Future* in 2021, followed by a tangible shift towards a more openly justice-centred messaging. In a much-noted call for the global climate strike in September 2021, Fridays for Future wrote:

The climate crisis does not exist in a vacuum. Other socio-economic crises such as racism, sexism, ableism, class inequality, and more amplify the climate crisis and vice versa. It is not just a single issue, our different struggles and liberations are connected and tied to each other. We are united in our fight for climate justice, but we must also acknowledge that we do not experience the same problems; nor do we experience them to the same extent. MAPA ... are experiencing the worst impacts of the climate crisis and are unable to adapt to it. This is because of the elite of the Global North who have caused the destruction of the lands of MAPA through colonialism, imperialism, systemic injustices, and their wanton greed which ultimately caused the warming of the planet.⁴⁴

At least rhetorically, then, it seems that the climate strike movement is shifting towards a more resolutely emancipatory and thus anti-capitalist politics of climate justice. Its biggest strategic challenge will be to back up this commitment with forms of action that effectively challenge capital itself, even at the risk of losing its present bourgeois support base. Such a shift will require reinventing the climate strike such that it poses a direct threat the ceaseless accumulation of fossil capital, while preventing co-optation into projects of ecological modernization.

A long history of the climate strike

Let us then define the climate strike normatively as a kind of strike action that temporarily disrupts capital accumulation in the fossil-fuelled capitalist system which has caused and continues to fuel the climate crisis in order to achieve social and ecological improvements.

44. "Uproot the System," Fridays for Future, 2021. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/september24/>

From this point of view, it would follow that many forms of strike actions under capitalism could effectively be called climate strikes, even if not deliberately organized as such.⁴⁵ Historically, many victories over fossil capital have been won through various forms of strike action – including industrial action, feminist, anti-colonial anti-racist strikes – during which workers used their ability to interrupt the otherwise incessant process of capital accumulation to achieve political and economic concessions for themselves and others. From this perspective, the climate strike is only the latest of countless – often more successful – attempts to defeat fossil capital through strike action. A thorough and systematic elaboration of this long history of the climate strike unfortunately exceeds the scope of this article, though it promises to reveal many important lessons for today’s climate strike movement. However, a mere anecdotal glance at the histories of industrial action, anti-racist and anti-colonial strikes, feminist strikes, and school strikes already brings to light some important ways in which all of these struggles converge in their opposition to fossil capitalism.

Industrial action

Given the complex relationship between labour unions and the climate justice movement today, it bears remembering that the origins of the modern labour movement predate those of the fossil fuel industry and that many of the earliest modern labour strikes were directed at preventing the roll-out of fossil fuel infrastructure. Consider the first modern industrial general strike, the English general strike of 1842. The strike, which began as a local labour dispute in the textile industry of Stalybridge near Manchester and soon spread to other parts of the country, was fueled by a range of concerns including rising bread prices and anger about the increased use of steam engines in the textile industry. The workers rightly feared these developments would lead to redundancies and health hazards. Chanting slogans such as “Stop the smoke!,” the strikers engaged in the mass sabotage of steam engines by way of removing of bolts and plugs from the machines’ water boilers. This destruction of machinery, Malm argues in *Fossil Capital*, was not incidental, but rather constitutive of the strike, which became popularly known as Plug Plot

45. This does not mean, of course, that *every* kind of strike action is necessarily aligned with a horizon of climate justice: Although strikes by coal miners or airplane pilots, for instance, have the potential to effectively save significant amounts of carbon, they may ultimately end up strengthening fundamentally unsustainable industries.

Riots.⁴⁶ After months, the strike was eventually defeated and its leaders mercilessly prosecuted, marking a decisive victory for the emergent fossil capitalist class.

As Malm points out, the ability to react to militant labour action represented a major motivation for mill owners to shift their source of energy from waterpower to steam energy in the first place. Although water remained the cheaper source of energy for much of the 19th century, the switch to steam power allowed capitalists to move their mills from the countryside to the city, where labour was more abundant and where greater police and military resources were available to quell unrest.⁴⁷

Faced with successive triumphs of fossil capital, the focus of militant labour activism in the Global North soon shifted to the fossil fuel industry itself. The growing systemic importance of coal meant that organized coal workers in conjunction with railway and shipping workers could effectively shut down the entire economy through coordinated strike actions. As Timothy Mitchell contends in *Carbon Democracy*, it was the collective bargaining power of the workers in coal mining, railways and shipping that accounted for the effectiveness of the great general strikes in Western Europe and North America in the late 19th and early 20th century.⁴⁸ Within decades, large general strikes in England, Germany, Belgium, the United States and elsewhere prompted the widespread adoption of universal suffrage, the eight-hour workday, the right to form labour unions and political organizations, and social insurance programs such as unemployment insurance and public retirement pensions.

The eventual decline of the age of general strikes in the Global North, Mitchell suggests, was marked by the gradual shift from coal to oil and gas as the primary source of energy first in the United States and later in Western Europe.⁴⁹ Unlike coal, the extraction of oil does not require a large workforce, which makes it harder for organized labour to intercept. Moreover, oil is usually transported through pipelines and on large tankers rather than on railways, which also makes it harder to affect its distribution through targeted strikes. Along with other factors, the pivot from coal to oil and gas significantly contributed to weakening of the labour movement, paving

46. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 162.

47. *Ibid.*, 89.

48. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011), 23.

49. *Ibid.*, 31.

the way for the neoliberal revolution of the late 20th century and an unprecedented expansion of the carbon economy.

While it may initially seem counterintuitive to think about the Plug Plot Riots or the great general strikes as climate strikes, both constitute instances of resistance to fossil capitalism and attempts to retain democratic control over the means of production. In this sense, the dilemma faced by the climate strike movement today is but a permutation of the challenge striking workers have confronted for almost two centuries: how to exert collective leverage most effectively in a global energy system specifically designed to enable capital accumulation unimpeded by organized labour and democratic control.

Anti-racist and anti-colonial strikes

Even older than the modern labour movement is the struggle against the colonial and racist structures of exploitation, which had enabled the industrialization of the North in the first place. It was this resistance in its various forms, including slowdowns, running away (marronage), sabotage, or even armed uprising that made decolonization and the abolition of slavery historical possibilities at all. This argument has been famously made by W. E. B. DuBois, who in *Black Reconstruction* argued that formal emancipation in the United States was achieved through a “general strike” in which the “black worker ... transferred his labour from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader,” thereby tipping the balance of the civil war in favour of the Union:

As soon, however, as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army. So that in this way it was really true that he served his former master and served the emancipating army; and it was also true that this withdrawal and bestowal of his labour decided the war.⁵⁰

The DuBoisian general strike, formal emancipation in the United States, and the advent of fossil capitalism were related in a variety of ways. On the one hand, as Jean-Francois Mouhot suggests, steam power strengthened the moral case for abolitionism by changing the perception of labour in industrialized societies, facilitating the widespread distribution of abolitionist pamphlets via the steam-driven

50. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 90.

press, and bolstering the economic and infrastructural might of the Northern states during the US civil war.⁵¹ On the other hand, emancipation enabled the large-scale transfer of labour power from the declining plantation economy into the fossil fuel sector. As Kathryn Yusssof has pointed out, the industrialization of the United States and the growth of its coal and steel industry were fed by the labour power of enslaved “free” African Americans.⁵² Among the largest convict labour companies were the Alabama Iron Ore and Tennessee Coal and Iron companies, which in turn supplied the coal mines of the U.S. Steel Corporation, set to become time the world’s largest corporation and the paragon of American industrialization. In the United Kingdom, the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean 1833 was linked to a taxpayer pay out of £20 million in “compensation” to former slave owners, which in turn was used to finance a significant share of fossil fuel infrastructure.

The complex entanglements between fossil economy, colonialism and racism also shaped the great anti-colonial general strikes of the 20th century. Across the world, contestations over the fossil fuel industry were at the centre of independence struggles, whether in Baku, where an oil workers’ strike played an important role in the first Russian revolution of 1905, or in the Caribbean, where Trinidadian oil workers spearheaded the 1937 region-wide labour unrest.⁵³ In Palestine, the 1936–1939 Arab revolt, the “most sustained anticolonial uprising against the British in the twentieth century,” featured mass sabotage of the strategically important Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline, and in South Africa, the 1946 African Mine Worker’s strike heralded decades of resistance to Apartheid.⁵⁴ The increasing dependence of the Global North on access to oil provided the working class of the South with unprecedented political power. One of the first countries to openly challenge the power of Western fossil capital was Mexico, where pressure by the local oil workers union led to the government’s decision to nationalize the oil industry in 1938.⁵⁵ The creation of Mexico’s state-owned oil company, PEMEX marked a watershed in

51. Jean-François Mouhot, “Past connections and present similarities in slave ownership and fossil fuel usage,” *Climatic Change* 105 (2011): 329–355. DOI: 10.1007/s10584-010-9982-7

52. Kathryn Yusssof, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 52.

53. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 33.

54. *Ibid.*, 104.

55. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 179.

the history of oil, paving the way for a wave of nationalizations in the following decades. In the latter half of the 20th century, the Middle East replaced Latin America as the world's second-most-productive oil region after the United States, which in turn greatly increased the region's workers' political power and provided a material base to the growing political force of Arab Nationalism. Governments in Iraq, Algeria, Syria and Libya were able to pursue policies independent of the region's superpowers. In Iran, Britain and the United States had supported the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 after he had nationalized the country's oil industry, only to see another major revolution in 1979, in which oil workers again played a central role. Even Saudi Arabia, a staunch ally to the United States, was able to gradually take ownership of its oil and gas, culminating in the full nationalization of Saudi Aramco in 1980.

However, as Mitchell contends, the structural design of 20th century fossil capitalism made it easier for governments to channel working class pressure into various resource nationalist political programs that left the broader imperialist world system intact:

As Europe switched from coal to oil, the earlier successes of its miners and railway workers proved much harder to replicate for the oil workers of Dhahran, Abadan and Kirkuk, or at the pipeline terminals and refineries on the coasts of Palestine and Lebanon. ... The demands of oil workers for labour rights and political freedoms could be translated into programmes of nationalisation, while production cartels could restrict supply so that gluts of oil throughout most of the twentieth century could be transformed into a vulnerable "strategic resource" that needed imperial armies and vassal states to protect it. These and many other socio-technical features of the oil industry made it increasingly difficult to build mechanisms of more democratic politics out of the production of oil.⁵⁶

The triumph of US-led fossil imperialism thus precipitated what Adom Getachew has called the "fall of self-determination" in the 1970s. Getachew writes:

The differences among the Third World states became starkly visible at the height of the oil crisis. While OPEC functioned in important ways as a model for the kinds of commodity associations other developing nations hoped to create and signalled what the power of collective action in the international sphere might accomplish, the hike in oil prices and the accompanying spike in food prices proved to be particularly painful for the developing world.⁵⁷

56. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 237.

57. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 169.

Wherever social movements refused to be co-opted into political projects amenable to fossil imperialism, they could expect to face violent repression. A case in point is the history of the *Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People* (MOSOP), a movement advocating for self-determination in Nigeria's Ogoniland, where oil extraction by Shell had led destroyed the livelihood of many communities. In 1993, the movement mobilized more than 300 000 Ogoni in one of the largest demonstrations in the history of the country. Actively supported by Shell, the Nigerian government reacted with brutal force, hanging nine Ogoni leaders on questionable charges and displacing tens of thousands in a brutal military operation.⁵⁸

As these examples show, the trajectory of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles is intimately intertwined with the history of fossil capitalism. Again, the climate justice movement today faces a challenge that has long been faced by movements in the Global South: how to break up a fossil imperialist world order based upon the incessant exploitation of natural resources in favor of a global system built on the principles of solidarity, self-determination, and ecology.

Feminist strikes

In a very different way, the women's strike movement, too, constitutes a struggle against fossil capital. Grounded in a feminist critique of the labour movement, whose conception of the "general strike" overlooked the centrality of women's work as well as reproductive labour, radical organizers in the 20th century began advocating for specifically feminist strikes. As the Italian feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa wrote in 1974:

We've never seen a general strike. We've only seen men, generally men from the big factories, come out on the streets, while their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, went on cooking in the kitchens.⁵⁹

The most well-attended of all the women's strikes of the 1970s took place in Iceland, where feminist groups were able to mobilize up to 90 percent of the country's women for a national *Women's Day Off* on October 24, 1975. The strike brought the country to a standstill, with schools, shops, nurseries, and fish factories closing. Reportedly, it

58. "Nigeria: Shell complicit in the arbitrary executions of Ogoni Nine as writ served in Dutch court," Amnesty International, June 29, 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/shell-complicit-arbitrary-executions-ogoni-nine-writ-dutch-court/>

59. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "A General Strike." Retrieved from: <https://caringlabour.wordpress.com/2010/10/20/mariarosa-dalla-costa-a-general-strike/>

also left many men overwhelmed with housework. A rally in the center of Reykjavik was attended by 25,000 people, more than a tenth of the Icelandic population at the time.⁶⁰ Although the immediate effects of the strike are disputed, the day is said to have paved the way for a number of progressive reforms, as well as the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the world's first democratically elected female president, in 1980. More recently, the feminist strike movement has seen a revival, notably in the 2016 All-Polish women's strike against the criminalization of abortion and in the #NiUnaMenos protests in Argentina and across Latin America. In the years prior to the pandemic, annual international women's strikes on March 8 – explicitly inspired by the women's strikes of the 1970s – were held in over fifty countries.⁶¹

The struggle against capitalist patriarchy, as many have pointed out, is also one against fossil capital, which relies wherever possible on patriarchal social relations to facilitate capital accumulation. A prime example of this interplay is the staggering rate of gendered violence associated with *man camps*, temporary accommodation complexes housing predominantly male workers employed in the fossil fuel industry. By turning the hard work of planet-wrecking into an expression of sexualized power, fossil capital continues to produce forms of masculinity that are quite literally toxic.⁶² This logic extends into the sphere of consumption, where many environmentally damaging behaviours such as driving, or meat consumption are marketed in heavily gendered ways. Unsurprisingly, (*white*) men are more likely to be climate change deniers than women.⁶³ On the other hand, capitalism's specific gendered division of labour also accounts for the fact that the impacts of the climate crisis are disproportionately felt by women and non-binary persons, who are more vulnerable to the direct effects of famine, drought, and natural disasters.

Therefore, the feminist movement, too, shares an important strategic dilemma with the climate strike movement: How to tackle a

60. Annadis Rudolfsdóttir, "The day the women went on strike," *The Guardian*, October 18, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/18/gender.uk>

61. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%* (New York: Verso, 2019), 7.

62. Cara Daggett, "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 47 (2018): 24–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818775817>

63. Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, "Cool dudes: The denial of climate change among conservative white males in the United States," *Global Environmental Change* 21, Issue 4 (October 2011): 1163–1172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.06.003>

system of fossil patriarchy that relies on patriarchal violence to foster accumulation, while systematically de-valuing the work and in particular the reproductive labour performed by women and non-binary persons.

School strikes

A long history of the climate strike would certainly be incomplete without reference to the legacy of the school strike itself. The school strike is a protest form as old as the school as a modern institution: reports of students striking against flogging and corporal punishment hark back to the 17th century. As Philip Ariès shows in *Centuries of Childhood*, these early school strikes could reach a massive scale, including violent and often armed school uprisings in which school buildings were damaged and teachers attacked.⁶⁴ With the onset of industrialization, school strikes often took inspiration from the labour movement, such as in England, where student strikes often coincided with industrial action. In Germany, students established student councils along with the workers' and soldiers' councils that were formed during the 1918 revolution.⁶⁵ School strikers were also often at the forefront of anti-colonial and anti-racist movements. In South Africa, for example, the 1976 school strike in Soweto against the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction turned into an uprising and one of the defining moments of the anti-Apartheid movement.

In the United States, students played a major role in the success of Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968, one of the first movements to explicitly link racial justice and environmental concerns and widely considered a constitutive moment of the environmental justice movement. The strike was led by the overwhelmingly Black workforce of the Memphis Department of Public Works; it had been sparked by the death of two of their colleagues, and included demands for higher wages, better workplace safety and the recognition of the sanitation workers' union. High school and college students soon joined the daily workers' daily marches. A march on March 28 saw tens of

64. Philipp Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 315–321.

65. Simon Teune, "Schulstreik: Geschichte einer Aktionsform und die Debatte über zivilen Ungehorsam [School Strike: The History of a Form of Action and the Civil Disobedience Debate]," in *Fridays for Future - Die Jugend gegen den Klimawandel [The Youth Against Climate Change]*, ed. Sebastian Haunss and Moritz Sommer (Bielefeld: Transcript verlag, 2020), 131–146.

thousands of students skip school in a mass act of civil disobedience.⁶⁶ Larry Payne, a student striker, was murdered by the police during the demonstration and became a martyr of the movement.

At first glance, the history of the school strike may seem less obviously related to fossil capitalism than the previously discussed strike traditions. However, students have long been at the forefront of social and ecological struggles directly aimed at capital – a promising history when considering the challenges faced by today’s climate strike movement.

(In)conclusion: the climate strike as horizon for future climate justice organizing

If only anecdotally, these examples illustrate how different strike traditions, such as industrial action, anti-colonial and anti-racist strikes, feminist strikes, and school strikes share common ground with the climate strike movement in their opposition to fossil capitalism. A maximally effective anti-capitalist climate strike, it would seem, could combine aspects of all these different strike traditions, striking different spheres of fossil capitalist accumulation in a globally coordinated and synchronized manner. This is anything but a new idea – plans to extend and widen the climate strike frame have been present in the movement-internal discourse since the first climate strikes were held. As one *Fridays for Future* organizer from Stockholm put it in the early phase of the movement: “It would be so great if something like all of Stockholm went on strike. If we get the unions on our side. If all the bank people don’t go to work. Then there’s a problem.”⁶⁷

So far, attempts to win over unions and other actors, such as during the September 2019 earth strike mobilization, have largely proven unfruitful. Therefore, the climate strike remains in many ways an unfinished project, a horizon, whose present appearance should not limit the scope of our imagination. One source of inspiration could be the appropriation of elements from other strike forms: How would, for example, a climate *strike post* for instance, look like? How about a climate union? Or even a climate *hartal*?

A successful broadening of the climate strike format might even require abandoning the term “climate strike” in favour of a more

66. “Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/memphis-sanitation-workers-strike>

67. Fopp, *Zukunft*, 37.

open framing (some have suggested the term *strike for life* in this context). In any case, future actions could draw one of the greatest strengths of the existing climate strike movements, the ability to organize and coordinate its actions globally. The movement and its leadership have developed and professionalized significantly since 2019, gathered valuable organizing experiences, and forged connections with other social movements during the pandemic. In Switzerland, climate strikers have already collaborated with the women's strike and some of the country's labour unions. In Singapore, they have organized in support of local delivery riders, and in India, *Fridays for Future* has supported the largest farmer's movement in history.

Admittedly, winning over other social movements to participate in a kind of climate general strike would require an immense organizing effort and involve tedious negotiations between different actors over framing, dates, and demands. In a situation with real time constraints, and in which no other political project has gotten close to radically challenging the global hegemony of extractive capitalism, let alone replacing it, it certainly would be worth a try.

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