

# Why strike action is climate action

*Striking pushes against the core capitalist dynamics also responsible for global warming, CUSP researcher Simon Mair writes. Reducing fossil fuel use will not happen without a major shift in the centres of power. Strike action is one way to build towards these shifts, and in this way can be a precursor to stronger climate action.*

## Simon Mair

**T**aking strike action is difficult. Some difficulties are obvious: sacrificing my pay as a lecturer creates immediate financial difficulties. Other difficulties are more hidden, like the pervasive anxiety of a strike day as emails roll in.

Strike-breaking colleagues remind me about pressing deadlines and students ask about class, marks, supervisions. I feel guilty for letting them down. Again, there is the threat of financial instability: will I be punished for papers I haven't written, the student work I haven't marked, the grants I haven't submitted?

This is all compounded by the sense that when I stop working I stop contributing in some small way to action on environmental issues which, for me, is the point of my academic career. [My research](#) aims to support efforts to build a different, more sustainable, economic system. Through [my teaching](#) I aim to help my students build the critical capacities and technical skills they need to support an ecological transition.

Not doing the work can leave me feeling that I'm letting down activists and others on the coalface of climate action in order to support narrower concerns around wages, working conditions and pensions. As Extinction Rebellion founder Roger Hallam [recently tweeted](#): "Why are lecturers not going on strike to stop their outrageous flying to conferences rather than protecting their pensions?"



Image: Norfolk NEU UCU PCS RMT ASLEF strike protest march in Norwich, Feb 2023. Courtesy of Roger Blackwell / flickr.com (CC-BY-NC 2.0)

I share this because I think these feelings are common. Many academics, [healthcare workers](#) and others feel a sense of vocation in their work. We do it for money, but for other reasons too. Our work is a way to contribute to the societies we hope to live in.

But I don't think these feelings should stop us from taking industrial action. Hallam is mistaken when he pits industrial action over wages [against climate action](#). Climate change is a systemic problem and I argue that strike action goes some way to addressing core systemic drivers of climate change.

### A systemic problem

When I say that climate change is a systemic problem I am looking beyond the greenhouse gas emissions which are the direct physical drivers of climate change. Those gases do not just miraculously appear. Rather, they are the result of production and consumption systems.

Production requires taking materials and applying energy to them in order to transform them into the thing that we want. It is inevitable that, somewhere in this process, some greenhouse gases will be emitted.

In some cases this is obvious: you take petrol and ignite it in order to be able to travel about. As you drive, your car emits carbon. But it is also present in less obvious places: when you stream a film or send an email, you are relying on server infrastructure that you may never see and that is many miles from where you are sitting.

But this infrastructure requires energy to run, and is made of metal that had to be dug up, heated and transformed. In short, climate change is a problem of global production and consumption systems.

Our production and consumption systems are dominated by capitalism, and so capitalism is at the heart of climate change. As I have [argued elsewhere](#): climate change and capitalism have developed together. The expansion of production and consumption that drives capitalist development requires energy, and fossil fuels are really good sources of energy.

That capitalism has driven climate change is no longer a particularly controversial position. Polling from right-wing think tank the [Institute for Economic Affairs](#) found that 75% of British 16 to 34 year olds agrees that climate change is a specifically capitalist problem.

### Capitalism prioritises making money

The features of capitalism that make it really hard to transition away from fossil fuels also lead to poor working conditions. For instance, one core feature is the prioritisation of making money over all other concerns.

When it comes to climate this operates on two levels. At its most basic, why leave fossil fuels in the ground when you can sell them?

On a higher level, the need to make money drives relentless expansion of production and consumption, often of things that do not meaningfully add to human flourishing. If you have an economic system that constantly strives to produce more stuff, you are going to find it hard to give up energy sources.

And when you're striving to make as much money as possible you're going to tend to work people harder and longer, and try to pay them less. In striving to make money capitalism reduces both ecosystems and workers to costs: annoyances that are to be ignored and minimised.

### More than money?

Participating in strike action is a demand for a democratisation of production and an assertion of the idea that

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something more than money matters. When we strike, we use our leverage as the people delivering the actual products in order to force our employers to consider things that they prefer to ignore. On the picket line I am asserting that I am more than a cost of production,

and more than a generator of income.

Strike action alone is not enough. I do not believe that standing on a picket line can replace tearing down the fossil fuel industry. But strike action does constitute a push against core capitalist dynamics.

Tearing down the fossil fuel industry will not happen without a major shift in the centres of power in capitalist economies. Strike action is one way to build towards these shifts, and in this way can be a precursor to stronger climate action.

To build on this potential requires more overlap between environmental and labour movements. There are existing links: Extinction Rebellion have a [Trade Unionist Chapter](#), and my own union, UCU, is [campaigning on environmental issues](#). But on the picket lines there is still space to have more conversations.

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### Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
  - Simon Mair, Angela Druckman and Tim Jackson: [A Tale of Two Utopias: Work in a Post-Growth World](#)
  - Simon Mair: [Neoliberal economics, planetary health, and the COVID-19 pandemic: a Marxist ecofeminist analysis](#)
  - Tim Jackson: [Beyond Consumer Capitalism](#)
  - Tim Jackson: [The Post-Growth Challenge](#)
  - Tim Jackson: [Paradise Lost? — The iron cage of consumerism](#)
  - A. Isham, C. Verfuert, A. Armstrong, P. Elf, B. Gatersleben and T. Jackson: [The Problematic Role of Materialistic Values in the Pursuit of Sustainable Well-Being](#)
  - Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia — the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
  - Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Unbearable Unawareness of our Ecological Existential Crisis](#)
  - John O'Neill: [Life Beyond Capital](#)
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❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author: Simon Mair** is an Ecological Economist, holding degrees in Environmental Science, Environmental Management and Ecological Economics. He is a Research Fellow at the University of Surrey. He works in the systems analysis strand of the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity and is co-investigator on "Powering Productivity".



❖ **About this paper:** This commentary first appeared in English in The Conversation and subsequently in the portal of the [Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity \(CUSP\)](#) in April 2023. "This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author, his institution and the original publisher: [The Conversation](#)."

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Simon Mair: The invisible heart: postgrowth economy as care – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, March 2024.

❖ **Tags:** capitalism, democracy, consumption, strike action, climate change, climate action.

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