FAP Winner – NTEU Member: Apocalypse now? Striking to save the world

- By Amy Thomas
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Between 2008 and 2011, I was an activist in the Australian climate movement. It was a weird, in-between time in politics: after Rudd's election and before his demise, the lines of march largely formed around which form of market solution – stronger, weaker; emissions trading scheme, carbon price – would be best suited to the problem. It seemed simple at the time. By pricing carbon, we would 'internalise the externalities': make capitalists pay, and they'd change their behaviour. Of course, that only makes sense if you accept that capitalism does what it says on the box.

In reality, the relationship between the state and capital in producing energy had the effect of creating a monopoly of pricing in the electricity market. The result of a price on carbon would be, some of us argued, that these electricity companies would pass the costs of the carbon price onto people paying the bills. And that would produce an inevitable backlash feeding from the age-old (false, damaging, and imagined) binary division that the right loves to encourage and exploit: the environmentalists versus the workers. Regardless of its utility in reducing emissions, the movement, we argued, should reject the whole thing as worse than useless.

Fast forward to the election of Tony Abbott in 2013 on the back of Labor's carbon tax, and the feeling was vindication, but in the horror genre. It feels strange, and sad, too, to be in 2019 thinking about a key slogan of the time, '100 per cent renewables by 2020'.

Now, as the oft-quoted headline tells us, we have 12 years to save the planet. And it's not just climate change we have to try to halt, but an ecological crisis that ranges from declining insect populations and species extinction to deforestation to catastrophic levels of ocean plastics. The particular constellation of 'leaders' we are supposed to persuade suggests that we live in a parody of our worst political nightmares. After a timid attempt to oppose the Adani coal mine in the most recent federal election, the Labor party has sought cover with an even more pusillanimous position. 'Coal', says Penny Wong, 'remains an important part of industry for Australia and it remains part of the global energy mix.' Scott Morrison is content to let the Pacific islands sink. The world's richest men, facing this crisis, are contemplating how they might colonise Mars in order to save a remnant of humanity, presumably a group selected by their current proximity to the levers of our exploitation.

So if 2019 has been marked by something for me, it was the year that feeling like the apocalypse was coming, that things were always going to get worse, that we only had a few decades (or 12 years) to 'solve' the problem of capitalist society, became something like a popular consciousness. Everyone around me has started not just to wonder about whether they could plan for the future, but started to accept that they were not, or could not. 'Can we really have children now?' turned from a question once asked populationists who wore hiking boots to meetings to regular dinner party conversation.

Yet much more encouraging has been the new resistance to our predicament. It has taken on a markedly different manifestation to that of the late 2000s. Back then, the climate movement was old, white, and grey: a mix between the kind of people who go to writers' festivals and the kind of people that work at the CSIRO. Now it is quite young, quite delightful, quite ready to strike.

The striking kids and teenagers have helped to counter a stupid, shopworn discourse about apathetic youths eating avocados on their Insta stories who only have themselves to blame for their inability to get a mortgage. Greta Thunberg, recently declared the 'guru of the apocalypse' by far right French politicians (they also called her the 'Justin Bieber of ecology', and I'm still struggling to work out why that's an insult), has 766,000 Twitter followers.

The strikers seem to understand the symbolic way the child works as a metaphor for hope for the future, and they have skillfully exploited it. But in imagining our futures we ought to reckon with our pasts, too. The historic cleavages between the working class and the environment movement 'weigh like a nightmare on the minds of the living'. With an eye on the rearview mirror, I argue that the challenges posed by those cleavages must be confronted head on, and that striking can be the first part of re-imagining labour so as to reshape our future outside capitalism.