

Milo Kei (PhD Soc./Anth.)

A study into class, political participation and the School Strike for Climate movement in Australia

Exploding into popular consciousness around the world in 2019 with more than 6 million people taking part in coordinated ‘strikes’ from school and various workplaces, the School Strike for Climate (SS4C) movement exemplifies one generation’s collective entreaty to world leaders to do more to save their futures. Couched in the unambiguous language of environmental justice, young people are mobilising their political voice to demand assertive climate action from their leaders. This mass political participation among the young is at odds with empirical findings, which show decades of diminished interest in politics and highly individualised political participation (if any at all).

State anxiety about the generational impacts of reduced youth political participation is evident in lamentations such as those expressed by the Governor General in 2005, anticipating a ‘crisis in democracy’ should ways to engage young people not be found. Yet the SS4C protests around Australia (demonstrating mass political engagement of tens of thousands of young people) are met with, at best, bemusement and at worst, denigration by politicians and commentators. The reality of most young lives today involves navigating access to expensive education; precarious employment in low-skill, low-wage jobs; and trying to ‘get ahead’ and achieve life milestones that their parents took for granted. For young people without the ‘bank of mum and dad’, a trajectory into financial stability and independence is especially hazy and fraught with risk. Employing the conceptual tools of Bourdieu, this research project will investigate the experience of young people participating in SS4C actions in the Hunter region of New South Wales and the Goldfields of Victoria. The project will investigate social stratification, relationality and political participation using a mixed methodology to bring understanding and deeper meaning to the classed existence of SS4C activists.