

Energy Strikes – How we can *really* fight global warming

It seems unstoppable: the world's getting warmer, bringing climate change catastrophe ever closer. The carbon levels in the atmosphere keep increasing, and our politicians don't do a thing about it. The coalition of big business and embedded political interests want to keep most people ignorant about the disaster our global society is bringing on itself.

But there's something we *can* do about it. Each of us, as individuals, can join in a global movement which has the power to bring about real, fundamental worldwide political change in a matter of years. In our lifetimes, we can play a part in turning round the energy juggernaut.

How? Through **Energy Strikes**.

Energy Strikes

An "Energy Strike" would be a worldwide day (or days) when all participants used only the amount of energy, on a per capita basis, that would lead to an eventual stabilization of atmospheric CO₂ to 350 ppm.

"Sustainable Energy Day"

An energy strike would be an annual event. It could be held any time during the year, but the proposed date would be **Sustainable Energy Day**: the day in the calendar year when the world has emitted the maximum amount of CO₂ consistent with an eventual long-term level of 350 ppm in the atmosphere.

This date, in itself, has the potential to achieve global significance. Based on the current estimates of sustainable CO₂ emissions at 10-20% of current per capita usage, Sustainable Energy Day would most likely occur in February/March.¹ This date could be communicated powerfully with the concept that "from now until the end of the year, every molecule of CO₂ produced is destabilizing the world's climate." As CO₂ emissions increase, this day would gradually occur earlier each year. A high profile annual event could become the publication of which day in the calendar will be Sustainable Energy Day, along with discussion of the annual trends. The goal would, of course, be for Sustainable Energy Day to start occurring later and later each year.

Energy Strike Activities

The goal during an Energy Strike would be for each participant to use only the amount of energy that would be consistent with a long-term level of 350 ppm of CO₂ in the atmosphere ("CO₂ sustainability"). This amount would be calculated on a worldwide per capita basis.

Depending on the participant's normal daily activities and their socio-economic status, this would lead to very different degrees of change in their usual habits and in some cases, no change at all (see **Energy Strike Impact** below for a discussion of the implications of this.)

In preparation for an Energy Strike, a web-based application would be made available, where participants could enter basic information about their activities in order to identify how much they are

¹ See, for example, [MacGregor & Chambwera \(2007\) "Room to move: 'ecological space' and emissions equity". *Sustainable Development Opinion*, International Institute for Environment and Development, London.](#) and <http://www.helio-international.org/reports/reports1998.cfm>.

currently exceeding CO₂ sustainability, and what they would need to do during the Energy Strike to achieve it. For example, a participant might enter information such as: current utility bill usage, vehicle used for commute, length of commute and type of work. In planning for the Energy Strike, they might interact dynamically with the web-based application to see how they could achieve CO₂ sustainability: perhaps it might require simply a different type of commute or reduction in home electricity usage; or for energy-intensive employment, it might require something more drastic such as taking the day off work.

During the Energy Strike, those participants who are taking time off their daily work might congregate and picket at the centers of high CO₂ production: e.g. airports, coal-fired power plants, luxury auto dealerships.

Energy Strike Rollout

The first Energy Strike would be envisaged as a one-day event. If this initial event were successful in raising global awareness, the concept could be rolled out over a number of years with gradually increasing time spans, as in the following hypothetical schedule centered around the symbolic “350” number:

Energy Strike duration: hypothetical schedule.

Years 1-2: One day

Years 3-4: 35.0 hours (covering two workdays and one night)

Years 5-6: 3.50 days

Years 7-8: 1 work week

Years 9-10: 350 hours (covering two weeks).

Over the long term, if the Energy Strike concept achieved mass global participation, the length of the strikes could themselves begin to have a measurable impact in reducing CO₂ emissions. Ultimately, there might be a goal to achieve an Energy Strike lasting 35 days (comparable to a modern globalized version of Ramadan or Lent).

Energy Strike Rationale

The vision of an Energy Strike arises from the Gandhian principle of non-violent non-cooperation, using powerful symbolic events to catalyze mass participation and raise global awareness. If the targeted symbolic event presents too challenging a threshold, it risks failing to achieve mass participation. If, on the other hand, it's too easy, it risks losing symbolic power. The symbolic event also needs to have the long-term potential to unsettle the status quo that's being challenged. A quintessential example of a successful symbolic event was Gandhi's 1930 Salt March, where thousands of Indians joined him in marching to the sea shore to make salt in defiance of the British salt tax.

The concept of the Energy Strike may offer a symbolic focus of attention that is 1.) at a low enough threshold of commitment to permit early mass participation 2.) has the potential to undermine the status quo over the long term.

Energy Strike Impact

The novelty and symbolic resonance of a global Energy Strike may have significant media impact. Visually, the sight of picketing strikers at airports or coal-fired power plants around the world could be compelling. For human interest, media might pick up on the changes in individual behavior required to achieve energy sustainability in their local area. The message of an Energy Strike might resonate in two ways:

- 1.) On the one hand, the significant changes in behavior required for just one day of energy sustainability might highlight how drastically the world is going off-course.
- 2.) On the other hand, those same changes in behavior might provide a positive roadmap showing that new habits and activities are possible.

At first, an Energy Strike would be mostly an awareness-raising symbolic event, focusing each individual on their own energy usage and hopefully highlighting the issue worldwide. If it gained momentum, however, future Energy Strikes might have enough real economic impact to gain increased media coverage, fueling greater impacts for the future. For example, if enough people could be persuaded not to fly during the Energy Strike, this might lead to a noticeable impact on the aviation industry. During a one-day Energy Strike, this would simply require minor alterations in scheduling. However, if the Energy Strikes became longer, extending to a week or a month, this could have meaningful worldwide impact.

One of the dynamics arising from an Energy Strike would be the vast differences between energy usage in different parts of the world and between different economic classes. In the Western world, many participants would require significant changes in their daily behavior to achieve CO₂ sustainability. In the developing world, there would be a huge disparity between rural or low-income participants, who may not need to change any of their behavior because their per capita energy usage is already below CO₂ sustainability, and higher-income urban participants, who may need to change their behavior to a degree comparable to those in developed countries.

This disparity in requirements for an Energy Strike would powerfully highlight the global dynamic that only a minority of the world's population is using energy at unsustainable levels, while the effects are being felt by all (especially by those who don't utilize their per capita share of energy.)

Issues and Challenges

The complexity of the message. The concept of an Energy Strike requires the communication of a fairly complex message: the notion of a per capita level of energy usage which would lead to CO₂ sustainability. However, once the concept is digested, this may provide a powerful long-term vision, and may have the potential to capture people's imagination worldwide.

The drastic nature of the message. The early date in the calendar year for Sustainable Energy Day, and the drastic changes in behavior required in the developed world during an Energy Strike, may risk overwhelming some people and turning them off the challenge. However, communication of the profound nature of the global challenge is essential to changing our behaviors in a way that will make a difference, and emphasis can be placed during the Energy Strike on avenues for incremental improvement.

The complexity of individual energy usage calculations. Perhaps the biggest challenge to the idea of Energy Strikes is the requirement that each individual would have to calculate for themselves what changes would be required in their daily behavior to achieve energy sustainability. This could only be achieved through a well-designed, user-friendly website, which required people to enter only a few

items of information, and used simplifying assumptions to give people their current and proposed energy usage levels.² The assumptions used in the website's calculations might become a target for climate change deniers to attack, and would have to be made completely transparent.

On the flip side, the very act of individuals interacting with a website to discover how they might reduce their carbon footprint would be, in itself, highly beneficial, and might catalyze an emotional commitment to participating in the Energy Strike. Additionally, if the assumptions did become a target of attack, the ensuing debate might also be helpful in raising greater awareness for the Energy Strike.

The disparity of required behavior for an Energy Strike. As discussed above, the disparity between developed and developing countries would be highlighted during an Energy Strike. While this may lead to some strange dynamics, it may ultimately be beneficial to raise this factor more fully to global awareness.

The required individual commitment. For most participants in the developed world, where the requirements of an Energy Strike would be most stringent, a one-day participation would not be a high threshold. For the lower-income participants in developing countries, who can least afford to change their daily behavior, the requirements for an Energy Strike would be negligible or non-existent. In the event of a successful rollout and increasing durations of Energy Strikes over subsequent years, the pain threshold for continued participation would gradually increase. This is the reason why the duration for Energy Strikes is envisaged to increase gradually, allowing participants to become emotionally committed to the concept over the years.

Time Frame for Implementation

If the decision were made to pursue an Energy Strike, the first one could take place on Sustainable Energy Day 2012. Let's make it happen!

Contact: jeremylent@gmail.com

² For an example of a current web-based carbon calculator, which is helpful but not yet sufficiently user-friendly, see <http://www.resurgence.org/education/carbon-calculator.html>.