

AMANDA THOMAS AND SOPHIE HANDFORD

'LOOK NANA, THIS IS MY FUTURE': A CONVERSATION WITH CLIMATE STRIKE ORGANISER SOPHIE HANDFORD

Recently, ESRA researcher Amanda Thomas spoke to Sophie Handford about the upcoming school strike for climate and the need for inter-generational solidarity in the struggle for climate justice.

Amanda Thomas: Thanks heaps for making the time for this. Firstly, you're fresh to organising: how has the past year been?

Sophie Handford: Pretty insane. At the end of last year when I was thinking about what I wanted to do after leaving high school, and I didn't really know, I had sent off all my forms to universities and was really set on doing that, and then I decided actually no, that's not where I am meant to be at this point of my life. Then I just kind of found myself a job and found myself with quite a bit of time because obviously at school you're working from 9 till 3 every Monday to Friday, like you're constrained by the school system. So I was like oh well, what else am I going to do?

And then I saw all the school strikes last year and realised there was nothing like it in New Zealand. People have this theory about New Zealand: that we're a clean, green country

and we do appear to be, because, you know, on the surface you see trees and the air is pretty clean to breathe. But I found out more about the impacts that we are having on our environment and it was really shocking.

I don't want to wait for someone to take on the mantle when this is such a pressing issue; and feeling absolutely terrified every single day is incredibly tiring in itself. The past 12 months have been incredibly busy, but I feel less tired than I did before because I'm not consumed by feeling absolutely paralysed the whole time. My days are filled with being inspired by others who are doing incredible work. Like the Greenpeace climbers.¹

¹ On the day of the interview, two Greenpeace climbers scaled the Majestic Centre, Pōneke's tallest building, to protest against OMV, an Austrian company with exploration permits off the Taranaki and lower South Island coasts. See: <https://www.greenpeace.org/new-zealand/press-release/greenpeace-climbers-scaling-wellingtons-tallest-building/>

It's been amazing, and I just feel like I have learnt so many skills. As you said, I am new to this kind of stuff. At school I was head girl, so I had a bit of experience with organising stuff, like events at school and bake sales. For me it was what I enjoy doing. But never anything on such a scale as this. I have met the most incredible people—like Raven [Maeder, a national organiser for the student strikes] who I messaged a couple of years ago because I went to a conference that she organised, and I was like: 'oh my god you're amazing. Do you want to be my mentor, and can you help me with some stuff?' She just knows so much stuff about the climate space, the way to organise things properly, and, well, everything. So I've learnt so much, more than I think I would have learnt if I went off to uni potentially, and skills that I will never lose. So it's been an insane 12 months but I wouldn't stop it for anything.

Amanda Thomas: What you're saying is really fascinating, because some of the research around youth activism in the climate space is about the danger of eco-anxiety, where you are just terrified, and it leads to paralysis. But also, the importance of mentors and older generations to be supportive and help bridge young people into strong citizenship.

Sophie Handford: Yeah, they've definitely been two of the biggest things. There have been some days where I have been like: everything we are doing in New Zealand with the school strikes, it's not going to have an impact. And there are some days when I get stuck in that. It's hard to get out of.

But then I am reminded by the small wins where we have a good conversation with an ally or a union and they're like 'we're behind you'.

There's no reason we can't get the whole of New Zealand behind us and actually make some serious change. Yup, there are some days where I feel pretty overcome by climate grief, because it is overwhelming, but it is also a lot more overwhelming to think of what will happen if we don't take action. For me, the thought of that is more overwhelming than the thought of doing a 6am breakfast interview on national TV.

Amanda Thomas: Tell me a bit about some of the strategising and organising work for the strikes earlier this year (in March and May) and leading into September?

Sophie Handford: We've been very committed to ensuring that it's led entirely by young people. So we've got a 12-year-old from Christchurch called Lucy who is one of our national co-convenors. We've been doing things like talking with different unions and members of parliament and that kind of thing. Also, the Elbow your Elders campaign which is a tactic launched with Generation Zero—so that's essentially where we are encouraging young people to link up with their grandparents and their parents and the elders in their community to say, actually, 'look nana this is my future'. The best inheritance you can give me is a liveable planet so take action now by submitting on the Zero Carbon Bill, by signing a petition to get parliament to declare a climate emergency, all of that.

We've been really trying to connect people and connect in ourselves with other groups based on values. Like the things that no one can really argue if we front up and say that it's our future and that's being put at risk, you also can't argue with that either because that's fact.

Amanda Thomas: I know that strike was the global tactic. What are your reflections on strikes as a tactic?

Sophie Handford: I think it's pretty effective personally. I mean it's hard to know because we haven't tried anything else. Lots of people have said 'you're young, you can't strike from school', but it's like actually no, if those people in power who are adults aren't going to act like adults and listen to the facts and listen to people with PhDs then how are we going to get people to listen? For young people, we are going to strike from school, and we are going to put something at risk, like our education, but you know what, that's nothing in comparison to what we might have to live with if we let climate change get to its very worst.

I think it is quite effective because it's also quite controversial, so it created a lot of conversation, even if it was more like 'you shouldn't skip school, this should be done on a weekend, da da da da'. It still has brought attention to what we were doing, which then brought attention to our demands, because people thought if students are skipping school, they must be skipping school for a reason. It was quite controversial, and we found people really taking sides. There were some people who were really trying to defend us and some who were just absolutely ruthless and trying to tear us down, calling us brainwashed. All of that may have been talking about the actual tactic instead of the cause, but they're linked, so I think that's quite effective.

Amanda Thomas: Totally. A friend of mine works in a bank and she could see the March strike from work. Some of her colleagues were saying 'they just want a day off work' and my friend had quite a heated discussion with them

and why the strikes were important. In work places everywhere I think it created opportunities for conversation.

Sophie Handford: Yeah, and it also meant that the media was onto us and that meant that the word spread further; that meant that we had more regional organisers join. It just escalated from that which wouldn't have happened if we did a little march on a weekend.

Amanda Thomas: I was really struck by the prominence of young women, globally and here, leading the strike for climate. Tell me about that.

Sophie Handford: Yeah, I'm not really sure why necessarily, but it has been amazing linking up with young women. Especially in Wellington and nationally. There are lots of young women involved. In saying that, there are lots of amazing young men involved and one of our key organisers is 15, from Onslow College, and he's awesome. But it varies from place to place. I think in Auckland it's mainly young men leading it.

I don't necessarily know why. We haven't been specifically focused on recruiting young women over young men, but it's just been the kind of way it's turned out, but we are finding that as the movement grows there are more young men coming on board.

Amanda Thomas: This is a global movement, but what are the dynamics that are specific to organising in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Sophie Handford: There's nothing we have to do as a part of that international level except to join a few calls for keeping each other updated, but it's really up to us as to how we make it relevant to the New Zealand context. Obviously, it's really

important that tangata whenua play a big role in that. So making sure that our movement is inclusive as possible for all groups, especially for tangata whenua and all minority groups.

We have been kind of handed this whole method of striking, but it's really important that it's relevant to the New Zealand context. It could look like different things, but obviously ensuring that we're engaging meaningfully with iwi in the area, making sure that we are opening our strikes with karakia, and acknowledging land, and acknowledging that we are kaitiaki of the land. So those things where I think it's really important to have that meaningful engagement and to really allow Māori people to lead. We've linked up with the Māori climate commissioner and we are doing some work with identifying spaces where young people involved in their iwi can step up and lead things in their own communities where we might not have organisers. So really growing that base of committed organisers who are passionate about issues.

We do acknowledge that we can do a lot better; we have been so focused on churning out these strikes and getting people along that yeah it is really important to reflect on how well we are doing in that space and I think that we still have quite a long way to go. Leading up to September we have a little bit more time because the last one we organised was a month in advance, so quite rushed. We do have a bit of time to kind of step back and really look at those partnerships and make sure we're in those partnerships in a way that's really connected.

Amanda Thomas: You guys use the language of climate justice. What do you mean by climate justice?

Sophie Handford: There are a couple of ways to approach it. For us it's acknowledging that climate change is also a social issue. It's about humanitarian issues, animal rights, Indigenous rights. It's all of these issues combined and any solution to climate change has to reduce the inequalities that are present instead of perpetuating them further. The solutions to climate change should not create growing inequalities in any of those issues. We want to make sure the solution to climate change brings environmental justice, Indigenous justice, social justice, and all those things. I think that's what we mean, it's addressing climate change as a holistic issue.

Amanda Thomas: Within some of the definitions of climate justice there's an inter-generational dimension to it, that climate justice is also about inter-generational justice. So I wanted to ask about the role of older generations in the movement and what we could do, what we should do.

Sophie Handford: We have framed it as the young people leading this movement, but it's really important that we have adult allies getting in behind us and as you said it is really important that the solution is inter-generational, because obviously those older than us do hold a lot of knowledge, power, and understanding of where some of this stuff has come from. How do we, as young people, understand all that but also lead the charge because it is our future and the decisions that are made now ultimately affect it? Our future is at stake.

We see the role of adults just getting in behind the young people and just supporting us. We've had lots of old activists help with that whole mentorship dynamic, jumping in and teaching us

skills and different tactics that we could use. And the elders thing, like having grandparents and parents jump in behind their kids, I think that's really powerful. I do think that if the movement involves the wider population of New Zealand that's a whole lot more power behind those young people as well. That's not to say that young people can't do it on their own, but I do think that together we have the ability to have a lot more impact.

And I do think that it's important that people aren't just like 'young people give us hope, they've got it under control'. Like as Greta [Thunberg] says, we don't want your hope, we want you to act, we want you to join us, we want you to walk the talk. If the young people give you hope, be a part of that hope and give other people hope. There will be a tipping-point where if we get enough people on that [parliament] lawn and if we flood everywhere, if everyone in New Zealand joins, the government can't turn us away, they can't refuse to act anymore, so we want people to be a part of that hope to inspire others, be inspired by our hope.

Especially for the September strike, with it being an inter-generational strike or general strike, we want to make sure that we do have adults and workers and parents and grandparents and anyone who will join us. It has been amazing to see the kind of support we have had from most adults.

Amanda Thomas: One of the things that has come out of the youth movement in particular are demands for declarations of climate emergency by local authorities and by central government. We've seen a whole lot of local authorities doing just that. What do you think about that and are there any risks about the language of a climate emergency and climate crisis?

Sophie Handford: Yeah, it's tricky. I've kind of been struggling with that one for a while now. I think it's really important to call it what it is and that we do call it a crisis because that's the narrative for action. If you call it climate change, then that kind of gives you the leeway to not take action. Whereas if you're calling it something like a climate crisis or climate emergency that requires an emergency response, so what you would do in an emergency is what you should be doing about climate change. It does shift the narrative and the way authorities do business as usual, like looking at everything through a climate change lens and acknowledging that it is a crisis.

At the same time, I totally get what you are saying, that yeah if you're like 'climate emergency, climate emergency', for some that could just be like 'ah! What do I do? We don't have time'. I think that could feel quite paralysing.

Setting the narrative as a climate emergency is one thing, but what we want from that declaration is urgent action which is also hope-bringing. I do think that climate emergency step is quite important in getting that urgent action. Even for me it's quite uncomfortable and just quite scary thinking about the whole idea of a climate emergency; but it's true, we can't really deny that it is an emergency. We need to call it what it is.

I think it's important that we do come together in our communities and support and empower each other because obviously getting to climate justice is going to require some tricky conversations. We are only going to get there by talking to the people at the top and talking to the CEOs of, like, PEPANZ [Petroleum Exploration

and Production Association]. We're only going to get there by actually calling them out.

This whole transition is going to be hard, it's going to be scary, and we might have to put aside some of our fears to get there. But it will be a lot less scary to do it now than to wait and then have to inherit, you know, the consequences of inaction.

Amanda Thomas: You're running for Kāpiti Coast District Council. Why did you decide to do that and how does that fit with your broader experiences of mobilising and political activism?

Sophie Handford: I guess one of the reasons why was, after doing all this work with School Strike and kind of constantly hounding our leaders, constantly going and speaking to council, we got them to declare a climate emergency and to commit to going carbon neutral as an organisation by 2025, which is awesome. But that whole time I was like, 'I just don't see myself reflected. I don't see the concerns that I have for my future reflected at all at this table'. I was asked, 'well what is the impact that Kapiti Coast District Council can have? We're just one drop in the ocean', those kinds of things. It's like, 'no you don't get it!' Young people look at that and they're like 'oh my gosh there is no hope'. Where is the action? We can't see the issues that will affect us most at that table. Awareness of climate change is really lacking.

People look to these politicians and think they've got all the answers, that they're doing totally fine. But they're not doing a hell of a lot, so it's time to get in there and give it a bit of a shake-up. I don't really know what I want to do going forward so I thought I will just throw my hat in the ring. We need more people who understand that climate change is an issue and are fully

committed to dedicating a lot of their time to trying to solve it. We are going to need people to put their plans on hold to prioritise climate activism. It's the most important thing I can be doing at the moment. I see a real lack in the issues that I've talked to my peers about being represented at the table, so I will just give it a shot.

Amanda Thomas: What does your ideal climate future look like?

Sophie Handford: So, talking about climate justice, if we are looking at it as humanitarian, social, environmental, all of these different issues, it looks like so many things. Like no one under the poverty line, no oil and gas in New Zealand at all, Indigenous people being treated as fairly as Pākehā people. It looks like a better connection between our environment and our land. It looks like a world that is more equitable, where people love our planet and love each other.

At the moment there's a lot of disconnect in so many areas. We're kind of so connected with our phones and we're so connected with these things which in the end won't really matter. In the end we've got the planet and we've got each other as humans. The earth is not ours. I think that when we start to realise that and reconcile some of those relationships between us and our planet, us and Indigenous people, us and animals, I think that's when we will see justice. I also think the transition has to be just in itself in that we have to be providing jobs for people who are currently working in those industries. How do we invest in renewable, regenerative industries and transform our economy as well to ensure the transition for those people?

Amanda Thomas: The strike in September: do you want to say anything about the build-up? Is there a call to action?

Sophie Handford: The call to action is to join us on Friday 27 September. It will still be youth-led but we're really encouraging and challenging our adult allies and our elders and workers and teachers and anyone to get in behind us. Bring a banner, bring a placard, just stand with us, listen

to us, be a part of it. It's like a question of what side of history do you want to be on? I think in the end, hopefully, we will find that this is a really important moment in our history with the Zero Carbon Bill and these strikes being the real tipping point to take action. We've found that people have left the past few strikes feeling really empowered. Anyone is welcome, bring your dog if you have to, like literally anyone. Join us.

Amanda Thomas is an ESRA Researcher and a lecturer in environmental studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research is largely grounded with communities, and examines democracy and the ways that environmental politics interact with social justice

Sophie Handford graduated from Kāpiti College in 2018 and is the national coordinator for School Strike 4 Climate. The first School Strike 4 Climate was held in March 2019 and involved 20,000 young people from across the country.