

# **ACTIVIST RESEARCH: POLITICAL ECONOMY IN REAL-WORLD CLASS STRUGGLES**

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*Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, in various ways;  
the point, however, is to change it.*

Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845).

Most radical political economists would agree energetically with Marx's famous dictum. Many were motivated by an initial passion for social change to enter this discipline in the first place; others came to a personal social change commitment through political economy studies and research. In general, progressive political economists have great appreciation for the historic role of working class and other social movements in propelling society toward greater equity, democracy and sustainability. Most would be glad if their personal research and teaching activities could make a contribution to those movements.

Given this natural alignment between the intellectual mission of radical political economy and the political mission of social change movements, it is perhaps surprising that there is not a deeper integration between political economy scholars and social change activism. There are pragmatic reasons why closer collaboration between political economy research and social change movements can be difficult to achieve in

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practice.<sup>1</sup> Scholars face institutional pressures and constraints (all-the-more binding in the era of corporatised universities) that divert their energies and attentions elsewhere, and in some cases even censor or prohibit deeper engagement with social movements. Some scholars are insufficiently attentive to the need for their work to be accessible to non-specialists and practically relevant in discrete real-world political and policy struggles; some position themselves as experts instructing movements on what they should do, rather than offering their skills in support of those movements.

For their part, social movements are often so under-resourced and/or fighting an immediate battle for survival that they fail to allocate time or attention to cultivating relationships with sympathetic scholars and researchers, commissioning helpful research or providing space for the presentation and mobilisation of that research. Some activists are insufficiently attuned to the constraints facing progressive researchers (especially those in a university setting) and to finding ways of working together that acknowledge and work around those constraints.

Despite these pragmatic challenges, it is undeniable that progressive researchers and social change movements would both benefit from closer collaboration. Movements are stronger when they can use credible research and expert validation in their campaigns. Sympathetic scholars will be gratified and motivated by the prospect that their research could contribute to real-world social change, rather than being relegated to peer-reviewed journals with limited readership and impact.

A more deliberate, pro-active approach to aligning progressive political economy research with the needs and priorities of social change movements can achieve a closer and more effective partnership between these two worlds. If movements have direct input in shaping the agenda for progressive political economy research (reflecting priorities related to their upcoming struggles), they will be more likely to make maximum use of that research in those campaigns and struggles. That in turn will amplify the real-world impact of the research, to the benefit and satisfaction of those who conducted it. In this model, the researchers must have autonomy and credibility to ensure that their work is honest, rigorous, and innovative; they are neither hired consultants, nor propagandists. But, through a more

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford (2008) considers several of these barriers and proposes a list of best practices for both scholars and activists to help overcome them.

organic partnership between political economy researchers and social change activists, both sides can make a bigger contribution to the social change that each dreams of. This approach can be called ‘activist research’.

In a few disciplines (such as adult education and sociology) there is an established body of theory and practice regarding action or participatory research.<sup>2</sup> Hall (1992: 15) defines participatory action research as ‘practice that attempt[s] to put the less powerful at the center of the knowledge creation process; to move people and their daily lived experiences of struggle and survival from the margins of epistemology to the center’. This broad approach is inspired and influenced by the work of Paulo Friere and others on emancipatory research and pedagogy strategies (Horton and Freire 1990), in which the lived experience of participants, and their struggles for equality and economic justice, become central to the tasks of both research and education. In political economy, however, this approach needs to be adapted. The subject matter of political economy, particularly when more formal economic or quantitative techniques are required, is less amenable to true participatory research design. And, within this broad topic area, the importance of having acknowledged ‘experts’ to interpret data and trends, develop robust findings, and propagate them in the battle of ideas can be unavoidable – in contrast to determined efforts in other disciplines to rid popular research and education of any reliance on experts. Nevertheless, the vision of activist research can be furthered by building closer and ongoing relationships between political economy scholars and social movement participants, to ensure that movement priorities are well represented on the research agenda, and to then engage scholars centrally in real-world struggles that mobilise their findings.

This article provides a summary of one sustained experiment in activist research: the Centre for Future Work, a progressive labour economics research institute in Australia allied with the goals and campaigns of the trade union movement. This initiative (quite similar to parallel projects in other countries<sup>3</sup>) shows the promise of a closer and more deliberate bond between political economy research and social change activism.

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<sup>2</sup> Cornish *et al.* (2023) provide a recent compendium of theoretical motivations and methodological practices.

<sup>3</sup> See Stanford (2022) for a catalogue of initiatives in several countries which similarly attempt to blend rigorous political economy research with on-the-ground social change activism.

Moreover, from its foundation, the Centre has benefited immensely from close collaboration with the Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney (as well as fruitful collaboration with progressive scholars at other institutions). Therefore, reflecting on the history and activities of the Centre provides a fitting opportunity to elucidate and celebrate another dimension of the Department's far-reaching influence in the fight for a better Australia.

### **Activist research: the Centre for Future Work**

The Centre for Future Work is a small research institute focused on labour market and economic issues facing working people and trade unions. It was founded in 2016 following discussions between the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Australia Institute, Australia's largest progressive think tank. It was recognised at the time that unions and other progressive labour perspectives were being drowned out by the overwhelming dominance of business and neoliberal voices on labour and related policy issues in Australia's media and policy discourses. The Centre was conceived as an effort to strengthen the profile and influence of progressive, union-supportive economic arguments in that battle of ideas, and to better equip unionists and other campaigners with more evidence and arguments to further their campaigns.

I had recently relocated to Australia for family reasons, after completing a 22-year career as economist and policy director with Unifor (formerly the Canadian Auto Workers), Canada's largest private sector trade union. I was considering work options, hoping to combine my expertise in left economics with my commitment to trade unionism. Andrew Dettmer, former President of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and on the board of directors of The Australia Institute, initiated discussions with the ACTU's then-Secretary Dave Oliver and Ben Oquist, then the Executive Director of The Australia Institute. We developed a proposed project which would combine two essential components. First, *accollegial relationship with trade unions*, to inform the Centre's research agenda (reflecting priority issues and struggles for the union movement) and ensure that the Centre's research is taken up actively in the organising and advocacy efforts of unions and other advocates. Second, an *arms-length independence*, so the Centre could address priority issues with credible, rigorous research that would be accepted as legitimate (by the

media, political leaders, the policy community, and the broader public); and when necessary express conclusions that might not be possible or comfortable within the official boundaries of trade unions.

The Australia Institute agreed to host the new Centre, offering to share its administrative infrastructure, communications platform, and policy connections to help the Centre develop its profile and impact. This was a great assistance to the Centre, especially in its initial years (until its name and staff became better known). The Centre is funded through a combination of donations, grants, and commissioned research projects. The Centre's staff grew from just me (serving as its founding Director from 2016 until late 2024) to five people by 2020.<sup>4</sup> In 2021 the Centre (with support from several unions) launched its Carmichael Centre: a special project to undertake research and education activities related to the legacy of the late union leader, Laurie Carmichael. The Centre cooperates closely with researchers at the Australia Institute, many of whom had previously published occasionally on labour issues and who continue to contribute to Centre-branded research publications. This partnership with the Centre also expanded the Australia Institute's engagement with labour issues, enhancing the Institute's presence and reputation on topics like wages, industrial relations, industrial policy, and the future of work.

The Centre's research output is diverse in both content and form. Staff undertake research related to almost any dimension of labour economics, industrial relations, and the evolution of work under capitalism. Topics addressed in the Centre's research agenda have included:

- current labour market conditions, including employment, unemployment, and hours of work
- wage and compensation trends, including the impact of inflation on real wages
- insecure, non-standard, and precarious work, including gig and platform employment models

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<sup>4</sup> Staff who previously worked at the Centre during its history include the late Fiona Carney, Troy Henderson, Alison Pennington, Dan Nahum, Eliza Littleton, Lily Raynes, and Greg Jericho. Most have gone on to fill other important roles in progressive research and advocacy settings; Jericho now serves as Chief Economist for the Australia Institute but contributes frequently to Centre for Future Work projects. At time of writing, the Centre's staff complement includes Fiona Macdonald (Acting Director), Lisa Heap, David Peetz, and Charlie Joyce.

- skills and training, vocational training, and the economic and social value of public education
- inequality in labour markets, including gender inequality, the challenges facing young workers, and employment discrimination against indigenous Australians and immigrants
- the nature and value of work in the public sector, human services and care work
- technology and the future of work, including automation, robotisation and artificial intelligence
- employment dimensions of climate change and the transition away from fossil fuels, including detailed mapping of fossil fuel employment and potential channels of adjustment as fossil fuel use is phased out
- industrial and sectoral policy issues, including research on the structural importance of manufacturing.

For a small team, the Centre has published prolifically, with hundreds of publications released across four broad categories of output:

- full-fledged research papers (of 20 pages or more), incorporating more formal methodology, analysis and references
- shorter briefing papers (of 5 to 20 pages in length), providing shorter-form and rapid response interventions on evolving issues
- commentaries and op-eds published in commercial and alternative media outlets
- academic-quality and peer-reviewed articles and chapters published in journals, books, and other scholarly outlets. While not the Centre's central work priority, its successful presence in scholarly research enhances its credibility as a source of high-quality research and contributes to important networks and relationships with scholars (including, notably, several in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney).

This output alone would cement the Centre's status as an important source of high-quality, progressive labour economics research. But the dimension of the Centre's work most relevant to the vision of 'activist research' is its synergy with trade unions and other advocates fighting for a fairer more sustainable world of work in Australia. The Centre's research and

publishing agenda is informed by consultation with unions and activists – including biannual meetings of the Centre’s Advisory Committee (composed of union representatives and leading progressive labour researchers from academia and civil society), as well as regular liaison between Centre staff, union activists, and other progressive advocates. That ongoing collaboration ensures the Centre’s research agenda is relevant to real-world debates and struggles on labour and related issues.

Moreover, there are several other organic ways in which the Centre’s research is fused with campaigns and struggles for a better world of work. Centre staff regularly speak to union conferences, leadership bodies, and panels. They appear frequently as expert witnesses in various parliamentary processes and industrial inquiries – including presenting their research at the Fair Work Commission and other tribunals (on topics including paid leave for family and domestic violence, reforms to Modern Awards, pay equity, and improved pay for care work). Centre staff frequently provide informal economic, strategic or quantitative advice and consultation on specific labour campaigns or issues. On several occasions, the Centre has sponsored open letters to marshal public support from academic economists and experts on key topics – such as preserving penalty rates for weekend and long hours work, the benefits of stronger wage growth, and the need for industrial policy support for the energy transition (through the recent Future Made in Australia initiative).

In other ways the Centre strengthens exchange and collaboration between progressive scholars and trade unions, such as publishing popularised versions of research from progressive labour academics, sponsoring union-related sessions at academic conferences (such as the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand, AIRAANZ), and brokering connections between unions and academic researchers with expertise on topics relevant to union campaigns.

A key aspect of the Centre’s work has been popular economics education for union officials, leaders, and activists. The Centre’s pedagogical approach embodies Freirian principles of activist adult education, integrating training in basic political economy with the lived experience of trade unionists in their workplaces, and their concurrent engagement in both industrial and political struggles. Since its inception, the Centre has

offered an intensive course titled Economics for Unionists,<sup>5</sup> offered through the ACTU's Australian Trade Union Institute (ATUI). The course has been offered in two-day and five-day versions and covers core topics in political economy including: the nature and history of capitalism; work, value, and exploitation; governments and budgets; globalisation; the economy and the environment; and possibilities for economic reform and social change. Hundreds of unionists from different unions, industries, and states have completed this course; they are now better able to mobilise political-economy knowledge and concepts in their continuing work. Centre staff also provide shorter or customised educational offerings tailored for specific audiences or on particular issues.

The best measure of whether the Centre's approach to activist research is succeeding is the extent to which its research and analysis is actively mobilised by unions and others in their campaigns and organising. In this regard, the evidence is both impressive and gratifying. Because the Centre's research agenda is pro-actively informed by the advocacy priorities of unions and other labour advocates, its output is sure to be relevant to current workers' struggles. The Centre's focus on research that is accessible, linked directly to current debates and campaigns, and helpful to workers' economic and political demands enhances its value in those struggles. The Centre's research has been a key asset in numerous labour movement campaigns that were ultimately victorious. Examples include:

- Pioneering research on paid leave from work for victims of domestic and family violence (Stanford 2016) helped change the discourse around that demand – showing that, while the costs of this measure were economically trivial, its economic and social benefits are substantial. Pioneering paid leave clauses were taken up broadly by state labour councils and the ACTU, extended incrementally through Fair Work Commission awards and are now embodied in a universal National Employment Standard entitlement to ten days paid leave.
- During the early weeks of the COVID pandemic, the Centre marshalled international evidence regarding the need for large-scale emergency income supports and wage subsidies, to try to moderate subsequent employment losses and social displacement

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<sup>5</sup> The structure and curriculum of this course is similar to the residential popular economics course described in Stanford (2009/10).



(Centre for Future Work 2020). In their emergency campaign aimed at the Coalition Commonwealth government (led by Scott Morrison), the ACTU and affiliated unions used this evidence to win commitment to emergency payments to both workers and employers (including Coronavirus Supplement payments and JobKeeper wage subsidies) that were among the most comprehensive in the world.

- The Centre conducted sustained research for several years on the historic slump in wage growth in Australia during the latter 2010s when wages grew more slowly than any other time in postwar history (see Stewart *et al.* 2018; Stewart *et al.* 2022). That set the stage for a sea change in public attitudes to wages, no longer seen as a problem to be controlled, but as a key sign of economic success. That shift in attitudes was significant in the 2022 federal election, in which public concern over low wage growth proved important, as shown by exit polling analysis (Raynes 2022).
- A related body of work addressed the marked erosion in collective bargaining that had occurred during the 2010s, when the proportion of workers in Australia covered by a current enterprise agreement fell by about half, with the decline especially precipitous in the private sector (Pennington 2018). Successive reports explored the implications for wage growth, inequality, and representation, arguing that reforms to make collective bargaining more feasible and accessible would strengthen wages. The Centre's estimates of the impacts on wage growth of industrial relations reforms in 2022 (including limited opportunities for multi-employer bargaining) were mobilised by advocates of those reforms (Stanford *et al.* 2022).
- In conjunction with colleagues at the Australia Institute, the Centre also explored the causes and consequences of the surge in inflation that occurred after the COVID pandemic – showing that this inflation reflected excess pricing and profits by corporations in strategic sectors of the economy, rather than conforming to 'wage-price spiral' theories emphasised in neoliberal anti-inflation policy (Richardson *et al.* 2022; Stanford 2023; Stanford *et al.* 2023). This work, cited widely in campaigns by unions for better wage policies at that time, helped change popular attitudes about inflation, shifting blame to corporations (instead of workers

and unions), and ultimately influencing several aspects of government policy response to that inflation. The Centre then played an active role in the Public Inquiry into Price Gouging and Unfair Pricing Practices, headed by Allan Fels and hosted by the ACTU, that further heightened public awareness of the role of corporate power in post-pandemic inflation (Fels 2024).

- The Centre published a stream of research documenting the substantial economic and social benefits arising from stronger public funding for public schools and TAFEs, showing that in some cases expanded school funding pays for itself through regular taxes collected from the resulting economic expansion (Pennington 2020; Littleton *et al.* 2023; Stanford 2024). Working adjacent to the Australian Education Union's advocacy campaigns, this research was influential in the struggle for public education, successfully culminating in the Commonwealth government's commitment to guarantee 100% funding of public schools to the School Resource Standard.

Each of these examples (and others not listed) shows the power of a symbiotic link between progressive political economy research and on-the-ground social movement activism. In each case, the Centre delved into a topic that was important to unions who intended it to be a major focus of their future activism. The research is conducted independently and rigorously, and the Centre can fully defend its methodology and findings. But, because its research is relevant to and taken up directly in real-world struggles, it achieves amplified resonance and influence – far more than research conducted in isolation by well-meaning scholars. These victories attest to the value of activist research and a closer and ongoing partnership between skilled political economists and the social change movements which will ultimately win the change these researchers dream of.

## Conclusion

This case study of the Centre for Future Work tells the story of one effort to more closely pair radical political economy research with real-world social change activism, in this case the struggle of Australia's working class for fairer, better work and wages. There are many other instances of creative and productive partnerships between progressive economists and

social movements.<sup>6</sup> Organisational forms through which the goals of activist research are manifested will evolve over time and place, depending on political circumstances, funding and people.

The formation and work of the Centre for Future Work owes much to the impact of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. This influence was felt in various ways. Several of the Centre's staff were graduates of the Department. Centre staff have partnered in many Department panels and forums: and been guest lecturers in Political Economy classes. Centre staff have contributed articles and symposia to the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* on topics such as the declining labour share of Australian GDP, neoliberal labour policy, and Commonwealth budgets. The Centre has partnered with faculty on panels at conferences such as AIRAANZ and the former Society for Heterodox Economics. The work of several Department members – including Elizabeth Hill on women and work, Frank Stilwell and Michael Beggs on macroeconomics and full employment, and Gareth Bryant on work and the environment – has been reposted or publicised through Centre publications and events.

In all these ways, the close and fruitful collaboration between the Centre for Future Work and the PE academics is testament to the value of activist research strategies in strengthening the bonds between radical political economy and social change movements. It also reflects the broad and lasting impact of the globally unique Department of Political Economy.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanford (2022) catalogues numerous other efforts to mobilise left economic ideas and proposals in real-world campaigns and movements – including a profile of the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) at the University of California, Berkeley, which resembles the strategies and strong union relationships of the Centre for Future Work.

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