

# **EMAIL FROM THE FUTURE**

*Notes from 2084*

## THE IMPOSSIBLE STRIKE

The World Strike of 2029 was like nothing the planet had ever seen. Of course, “world strikes” over the Warming had already been happening for well over a decade—since I was in elementary school—but there was never the truly systematic global shutdown that might make a real impact.

And by then, there was more driving the Strike than simply climate. A long-term effect of the early century COVID pandemic, besides lingering medical conditions, was the deeper radicalization of the young. The pandemic had made global inequality far more severe, and the influence of the corporate powers and ultrarich was omnipresent.

Formal planning had started a year earlier. The Strike was called for April 22—a holiday then called “Earth Day.” Dozens of countries had made Earth Day a national holiday in the mid-2020s—a small bone to toss to those noisy environmentalists. Thus many workers were already off for the day and simply never returned to the job.

Essential services—healthcare, food, water, utilities—remained. But across the developed world, and much of the

developing, airplanes were grounded, mass transit closed, all non-essential retail shut, cinemas dark, streaming entertainment offline. Two-thirds of workers left their jobs. The robots in the vast e-tail warehouses went on standby as their human supervisors stayed home. Financial services limped along on emergency backup plans. Small businesses owners worldwide were not specifically targeted. The intent of the strike was to cripple the corporate powers and, by extension, the ultrarich.

Even in China, relatively isolated from the world on its insular national network, labor stoppages began to spread, and the Party, after four ominous days of silence, endorsed the Strike. Cynics argue that the Chinese acquiescence was a shrewd business move, given that nation's lead in renewable and sustainable technologies. And indeed the subsequent decades made China the richest country on the planet--although certainly not the happiest.

While people of all ages ultimately joined in, a majority of the early strikers were under thirty-five. I was in my first year at City College in New York. I worked with the CCNY planning committee for three months, recruiting students for various strike duties. Then I joined community organizers to distribute food; it was similar, older organizers said, to the mutual aid systems set up during the COVID crisis, when I was still a kid.

Thanks to the Warming, the April weather was moderate in New York City, so thousands of us slept in parks. The mayor joined the strikers in Zuccotti Park, which was then known for a much earlier (and prophetic) protest called "Occupy Wall Street." She announced that there would be no police activity unless strikers became violent or posed a threat to public safety. There was very little.

The goal was simply to stop the business of the planet. There were strikers in at least 70 different countries, and it was a similar story abroad: peaceful protests, surprisingly little violence, and largely sympathetic police forces. Much of local law enforcement had either suffered Warming damage themselves or had been deployed in disaster relief operations. Most remarkably, a half-dozen local military conflicts, mostly in Africa and Southeast Asia, announced “climate truces,” just like the Christmas Truce on the frontlines in World War I.

However, the biggest and most effective Strike action was deployed at the end of the first day: The entire internet, across the planet, began to slow down.

It didn’t stop completely. We strikers needed the internet to coordinate actions. But by prior plan, all of the Strike communication was done as simple text—no streaming, no audio, no video, no large files to upload and download. We used a new messaging app called Hansen, after one of the early climate scientists. Hansen had been launched three months earlier as a “low-carbon” alternative to existing messaging services, with its ultimate purpose undisclosed.

Prior to the Strike, thousands of young IT workers from around the world used an encrypted chat room to plan the digital slowdown: from Google to IBM, the New York Stock Exchange to a dozen global banks, Cambridge and Tsinghua to Stanford and the Technische Universität Berlin—the list went on and on. It even included younger members of the Internet Engineering Task Force, the international group in charge of maintaining and improving the Web. Occasionally bits of their work would become public but it was easily explained as a volunteer task force to identify and prevent potential network weaknesses.

The global internet slowdown was a monumental collective hack, now the stuff of programming legend and a half dozen historical docs. The details were complex: coordinated teamwork between tens of thousands of IT departments and server farms in dozens of countries. The goal was to throttle the bandwidth on the global internet so that it became useless for large corporations and the financial sector.

World financial markets closed. International business slowed to a tenth of the pre-strike volumes. Banks shut down their ATM networks; the bank branches that still had human tellers were swamped with customers seeking cash.

But cash wasn't always necessary. Most of the basics of life were provided by volunteers or barter, and several regional grocery chains donated food. Funds had been crowd-sourced over the previous months should cash prove necessary. Many landlords promised to delay rent payments; smaller banks temporarily halted late fees on mortgage and loan payments. Much of what had been learned about community resilience during COVID turned out to be very helpful in the Strike.

Strike leaders arose on each continent—often well-known activists or social reformers, sometimes elected officials, a few influencers. But there was no truly international figure of authority. Much of Gen Z had come to mistrust charismatic, one-person leadership ever since the disastrous rise of the nationalist strongmen in the early century, whose “populist” policies in reality rarely benefited anyone under 30. And we'd seen too many leaders of our own generation torn to pieces by uncontrolled social media.

Perhaps solitary authority figures worked when the person with the loudest voice commanded the public space—cave, hut, village square—but with the Internet many voices

could be heard. The difficulty, on the Internet, of course, had always been sorting all those voices out and determining the collective will.

But that was evolving as well.

The IT volunteers who engineered the slowdown and built the Hansen messaging system also adapted an AI market research agent used by the corporate powers. The AI was capable of reading millions of posts and synthesizing a general group opinion. It had previously been used to harvest consumer sentiment on weighty matters like dishwashing detergent or dog food. But it clearly had potential for higher purposes.

The volunteers added a voting option and gave it a goofy codename, Votetron, which, like many codenames, stuck. (Votetron was just the beginning of the rapid evolution of the commercial Internet in the 2030s and 2040s—and, some say, an element in the emergence of Nous.)

There was argument as to whether this approach to voting unfairly disenfranchised those without connection to the Internet. And perhaps it did. But there was a planet to save.

A team of ten representatives from around the world had been chosen to be the negotiating voice of the Strikers—the Board. Some reps were already famous; others had been nominated by the planet’s leading environmental NGOs. The representatives pledged to remain true to the group opinion as generated daily by Votetron.

Historians now agree: the entire Strike governance was an ad hoc, exceedingly complicated, technically perilous, ridiculously fragile and borderline insane way to run an organization.

Yet somehow it worked.