Editorial: Climate Emergency and Work on a Heated Planet

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Abstract

This Editorial introduces a Special Issue of the *Anti-Trafficking Review* that analyses the links between climate change, migration, and exploitative labour. It documents some of the deteriorating climate-induced labour conditions and outlines the main arguments made in the Special Issue contributions. It concludes with several recommendations for future research and possible actions to protect workers on a heating planet.

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'There is something about the weather'[1]

As all living things face terrifyingly dangerous and life-threatening climate events, humanity is at a juncture, a moment of existential choices. In line with the mission of the *Anti-Trafficking Review* to examine sources of and solutions to labour and migrant exploitation, we can—and must—build new modes of living and working that dismantle current extractive, death-creating, and unsustainable systems. Otherwise, as the articles in this Special Issue explore, the climate crisis will continue to deepen existing inequities, widen the radius of precarious work, and create new forms of exploitation. Extreme heat, sea level rise, drought, floods, fires and hurricanes, amongst other slow and rapid-onset events, are threat multipliers that intensify workers' vulnerabilities.[2] As workers labour in increasingly perilous conditions, the line between minor mistreatment and extreme exploitation is blurring, transforming many workplaces into sites that

1 The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth*, Common Notions, New York, 2021.

2 S Goodman, *Threat Multiplier: Climate, Military Leadership, and the Fight for Global Security*, Island Press, Washington, DC, 2024.

meet different countries' legal definition of human trafficking. Yet, we are only at the beginning stages of preventing and redressing—legally and politically—the normalisation of escalating climate-related harms.

This Special Issue documents ongoing deteriorating climate-induced labour conditions. It asks what will 'count' as forced labour when extreme heat conditions blanket the globe and climate-related events change landscapes, economies, and everyday lifeways. We consider local knowledge, ways of seeing, and solidarity within and across justice-seeking movements—climate/environmental, de-colonial, racial, worker, migrant, feminist, food, and prison—as starting points. It is our hope that this Special Issue launches and amplifies care-forward conversations across these otherwise often siloed movements. This intersectional approach also recognises what abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as the effects of entangled crises on already vulnerable people: 'For anybody who is caught up in the systems that are shaped by extractive capitalism and organized violence, there is a cumulative and compounded effect on their persons and their lives.'[3]

Meanwhile, workers across labour sectors throughout the world are more unsafe every day. It does not have to be this way. We see this Special Issue as 'sending out a flare', an urgent 'call to begin building new labour protections to keep pace with ever-increasing climate-generated dangers.'[4] Immediate worker protections are easy fixes within current systems of law and policy, such as mandating water and shade breaks and guaranteeing disaster pay when climate-related events interrupt work. Longer-term protections are trickier and involve overhauling capitalist ways of life. Rooted in abolitionist scholarship and action, along with critiques of racial capitalism, this issue argues for a more just economic system that allows people and the planet to thrive.[5] It also insists that workers and the communities in which they are embedded are experts. We must begin by listening to those on the frontlines of climate change not only to learn about worsening dangers and their strategies to stay safe, but also about longer-term structural changes that are needed. The future of protecting workers is being led by workers themselves, as documented by this issue's ethnographers, attorneys, social workers, and other

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3 K Hayes, 'Ruth Wilson Gilmore on Abolition, the Climate Crisis and What Must Be Done', *Truthout*, 14 April 2022, retrieved 27 August 2025, https://truthout.org/audio/ruth-wilson-gilmore-on-abolition-the-climate-crisis-and-what-must-be-done.

4 Brennan, Kim, and Jackson in this issue.

5 Based on Cedric Robinson's writing on racial capitalism, geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's abolitionist framework extends beyond prison walls as she expansively describes abolition's goal to 'change how we interact with each other and the planet by putting people before profits, welfare before warfare, and life over death'. R W Gilmore, 'Foreword', in D Berger, *The Struggle Within: Prisons, Political Prisoners, and Mass Movements in the United States*, Kersplebedeb Publishing, Montreal, 2014, p. viii.

contributors who have had the opportunity to listen to and learn from workers, and use worker knowledge to forge effective plans of action. Following the expertise of workers is exactly what Marxist philosopher Kohei Saito instructs in his treatise on degrowth, writing that we cannot 'entrust the salvation of the Earth's future to the emergency responses dreamed up by politicians, experts, and other elites' but instead must listen to 'ordinary citizens…testify to their experiences' with capitalism, the 'root cause' of the climate crisis.'[6]

Written on the Body

Although workers the world over long have virulently denounced, resisted, and strategised against capitalism's harms, we are racing to a new and dangerous low point within the Anthropocene. Workers are labouring in climate-altered conditions that threaten their short- and long-term wellbeing. While it is common knowledge that some of the world's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs have been outsourced to the Global South, where populations have disproportionately borne the costs of climate change, capitalism has altered the entire planet—not just part of it. With 'freak' storms and extreme temperatures no longer rare in the Global North, labouring 'here' (and not just 'over there') increasingly takes place under lethal conditions. Capitalism's capacity to devour people and the planet, famously described as a vampire by Marx, more recently has prompted comparison to cannibalism by philosopher Nancy Fraser, and to a horror story by Marxist critic Jon Greenaway.[7] This Special Issue is concerned with how the climate crisis accelerates capitalism's 'consumption' of the most vulnerable workers' bodies, 'chew(ing) them to pieces in the gears of the machines.'[8] There is nothing 'slow' about the immediate violence of labouring through scorching temperatures, choking wildfire smoke, or toxic sludge from flooding.[9] Investigative reporter Hannah Dreier's series in the *New York Times* on the lethality of wildfire smoke on young healthy wildland fire fighters was nothing short of shocking. Otherwise healthy fire fighters have been stricken by fast-moving, and often deadly, forms

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6 Predictions of what is ahead in eighty years' time are catastrophic: hundreds of millions of people will be forced to evacuate their homes; the global food supply will no longer sustain the world's population; and economic damage could cost upward of USD 27 trillion annually (see K Saito, *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*, Astra House, New York, 2024, p. XIX).

7 N Fraser, *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet—and what we can do about it*, Verso Books, London, 2022; J Greenaway, *Capitalism: A Horror Story: Gothic Marxism and the Dark Side of the Radical Imagination*, Repeater Books, London, 2024.

8 Greenaway, pp. 36, 5.

9 See R Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

of cancer.[10] The immediate health effects are so unmistakable that within a week of Drier's first article, the US Forest Service lifted its (perplexing) mask ban.[11]

While scientists predict tipping points beyond which the planet's destruction would be irreversible, no such modelling is needed to understand the limits of the human body. Physicians Sorensen and Garcia-Trabanino have written that 'we may have now reached a physiological limit, in terms of heat exposure, at which acclimatization and behavioral modifications can no longer overcome the biologic stressors of unsafe working conditions and environmental exposures in these hot spot communities.'[12] The articles in this Special Issue describe how the most vulnerable have deployed various strategies to live healthy and dignified lives.

Terms

Since we see this Special Issue as a kind of flare about work amid the climate emergency, it contains stories from disparate geographical and ecological contexts. We invite readers to use the term 'precarious work' to encompass a wide range of low-paying insecure work that can tip into forced labour, human trafficking, and debt bondage. While the term 'modern slavery' has been used as a catch-all term, we urge readers to insist on terms that are more precise as well as to eschew morally-laden historical referents that diminish plantation slavery that was ensconced in law and enforced with slave patrols.[13] Workers' exploitation, including forced labour, because of climate catastrophe is a powerful enough descriptor without resorting to terms that often lead to pontificating and politicking rather than to crafting and supporting policies that protect workers. Instead, we find situating trafficking at one end of a continuum of worker exploitation particularly

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10 H Dreier, 'Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying', *New York Times*, 17 August 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html; N Dreier, "'If I Live to be 25, I've Lived a Good Life'", *New York Times*, 7 September 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/07/us/wildfire-firefighter-cancer.html

11 H Dreier, 'U.S. Wildfire Fighters to Mask Up After Decades-Long Ban on Smoke Protections', *New York Times*, 9 September 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/us/wildfires-masks-firefighters.html.

12 C Sorensen and R Garcia-Trabanino, 'A New Era of Climate Medicine — Addressing Heat-Triggered Renal Disease', *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 381, no. 8, 2019, pp. 693–696, https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp1907859. Heat extremes not only exacerbate known diseases, but also produce new ones such as chronic kidney disease of unknown origin (CKDu) which disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. (See *Ibid.*)

13 D Brennan, *Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.

helpful to understand how already precarious work can easily slip into extreme exploitation/trafficking because of the climate crisis.

It is important to note that many people affected by the climate crisis do not call it as such. In his interview in this Special Issue, anthropologist and filmmaker **David Feingold** reflects on the countless conversations about the environment he has had with people throughout Southeast Asia since the 1960s. While man-made changes to the climate have altered lifeways and livelihoods, people more often commented on the changes and their effects rather than their source. Similarly, **Jolemia Nascimento das Chagas, Dionéia Ferreira, and Ginny Baumann** describe how people who depend on fishing from the Manicoré River in the Brazilian state of Amazonas do not 'use the jargon of international conferences' but instead speak 'in more literal terms about the rapid changes they see all around them'. For example, about the scorching heat that forces them to go to their fields much earlier in the morning; mass deaths of fish in the dried-up rivers; wildfires in the forests; and worsening scarcity of drinking water.

Below we introduce other articles in this Special Issue in sections about what the climate crisis sets in motion.

The Climate Crisis: *Compounds vulnerabilities*

All the articles in one way or another explore how the climate crisis amplifies vulnerabilities, testing the International Labour Organization's notion of 'decent work'—the topic of the article by **Bethany Jackson, Nicole Tichenor Blackstone, and Jessica L. Decker Sparks**. They argue that the pace of extreme weather events challenges the commitments that governments and international governance mechanisms have espoused to promote decent work. We single out the article by **Tasnia Khandaker Prova, Era Robbani, and Humaun Kabir** for beautifully capturing how the climate crisis collides with cultural codes along gender and generational lines. Focusing on elderly people and people with disabilities in the southwestern borderlands of Bangladesh, they write that deltaic communities 'struggle to keep pace with fast-eroding rivers, where natural shocks like floods and cyclones increase in intensity and frequency with each passing year'. Some of the most vulnerable people in the community make decisions that might not make sense to others. Take Aparna, a 90-year-old woman, who in the path of a fast-moving cyclone decided to return to her 'flimsy' thatched house instead of seeking refuge at the closest cyclone shelter. Her decision was based on long-held understandings about the dangers of multi-purpose shelters for women. Aparna's decision to ride out the storm on her own teaches us how plans and systems can 'perpetuate exclusion'. The authors also write about a disabled father who poetically describes that climate change has made life 'less sweet', since his famed date molasses literally does not taste the same anymore.

The Climate Crisis: *Tips low-wage jobs into forced labour*

As worksites become increasingly hazardous, or what is known in environmental justice parlance as 'sacrifice zones', legal frameworks that protect against forced labour do not account—as of yet—for the heightened risks workers face due to climate change.[14] The article by **Denise Brennan, Kathleen Kim, and Julia Jackson** calls for the re-evaluation of the socio-legal dimensions of forced labour as climate-altered living and working conditions worsen.[15] It considers how climate-related events blur the line between lousy exploitative work and trafficked labour. Worksites enveloped in choking wildfire smoke, for example, are grotesquely unsafe and life-threatening. But how should we view the interconnected systems that deliver people into these worksites, and shape their decisions (or their perception) that they cannot leave? This article—and the entire Special Issue—ask readers to consider what to call, how to measure, as well as to advocate for robust protections against rapidly changing labour conditions.

The Climate Crisis: *Widens the radius of precarious work, dragging dispossessed workers into extractive jobs*

It is no longer the most low-wage marginalised workers who are exposed to dangers and economic precarity because of extreme weather. Authors in this Special Issue write about workers long understood as vulnerable as well as those newly made so because of climate-related events. **Sallie Yea**'s article on the exploitation of Filipino men on distant water fishing vessels captures the disposability of low-wage workers. Pushed into working on these vessels because of compounding vulnerabilities at home, these men work in what amounts to a floating jail without sufficient desalinated water, nutritious food, or medical care. The lack of drinkable water is so severe that some resort to drinking the rusty water from air conditioning units. Their egregious mistreatment, which has led to disease and, in some cases, death, reflects employers' gruesome recklessness with what they see as disposable bodies.

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14 S Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the Unites States*, MIT Press, Boston, 2010.

15 R D Bullard and B Wright, *The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities*, NYU Press, New York, 2012; M Méndez, G Flores-Haro, and L Zucker, 'The (In)Visible Victims of Disaster: Understanding the Vulnerability of Undocumented Latino/a and Indigenous Immigrants', *Geoforum*, vol. 116, 2020, pp. 50–62, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.07.007; D E Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*, NYU Press, New York, 2014.

We are all familiar with challenges ensuring fair treatment of workers along supply chains, and the renewable energy sector is no exception. **Phoebe Michelmore and Marinella Marmo**'s article discusses exploitation of Uyghur workers in China who work in solar power supply chains. They demonstrate that in the global race to transition to net zero, workers are expendable in the name of saving the planet. As the climate crisis creates new forms of work, including within a green economy, there will be new forms of exploitation. The ethics of green industrial policy are fraught; renewable technologies *here* often rely on neocolonial techniques of extraction and exploitation *over there*. Given the 'territorially uneven costs and benefits' built into extractive economies, it is a daunting challenge to internationalise robust ethical, equitable, and dignified forms of work stretched across supply chains, even green ones.[16] Once adopted, green technologies not only can be dirty at the end of their life cycle, but also dangerous for workers involved in their installation, maintenance, and recycling.[17] Installation of solar panels, for example, like roofing jobs in general, is known for its dangers due to injury and death from falls as well as proximity to overhead power lines in which workers—and their tools—can come into contact and lead to electrocution.[18]

Climate change not only worsens working conditions in jobs that workers might have chosen, but also forces people to work in industries that directly contribute to the climate crisis. **Chagas, Ferreira and Baumann** describe rural workers in the Brazilian Amazon surviving through family farming in locales with little or no government investment in services or infrastructure. Only making a 'pittance', the 'tragic twist' is that many 'have no choice but to accept jobs to carry out deforestation and mining' which further destroy the livelihoods of their neighbours. They can be recruited 'precisely because the conditions required for meeting their basic needs have been removed by the invaders and exhausted by climate change'.

Similarly, **Merry Jean A. Caparas and Maria Aurora Teresita W. Tabada** tell the story of a small agricultural village in the Philippines that was devastated by a super typhoon, forcing rice farmers to sell their land. At the same time, government efforts to prepare for future extreme weather events prioritised

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16 T N Riofrancos, 'Scaling Democracy: Participation and Resource Extraction in Latin America', *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 15, issue 3, 2017, pp. 678–696, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000901.

17 A Atasu, S Duran, and L N Van Wassenhove, 'The Dark Side of Solar Power', *Harvard Business Review*, 18 June 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/06/the-dark-side-of-solar-power.

18 Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 'Green Job Hazards', n.d., retrieved 8 October 2025, https://www.osha.gov/green-jobs/solar/electrical; B Wang, '2020 Fatalities for US Roofers Increased 15% as Solar Roof Installations Increase', *Next Big Future*, 6 July 202, https://www.nextbigfuture.com/2021/07/2020-fatalities-for-us-roofers-increased-15-as-solar-roof-installations-increase.html.

infrastructure development, leading to a rapid expansion of sand and gravel extraction that contaminated the village's irrigation system. Workers the world over are being dragged into participating in the dissolution of forms of self-sufficiency, control, and solidarity.

The Climate Crisis: *Forces people to undertake risky strategies with little time to plan*

As the climate crisis forces people to look for work beyond their local economies, many become vulnerable to fraudulent recruiters, debt brokers, and traffickers. 'Climate refugees' a catch-all term with no legal teeth, belies the range of legal statuses and work authorisations with which individuals operate. **Ruta Nimkar and Julia Schweers** use large survey data to examine how individuals and families in Ethiopia and the Philippines evaluate whether to undertake risky migration, arguing that governments' climate adaptation strategies, no matter how well intentioned, often exclude the most vulnerable people. Decades of robust migration scholarship has documented how migrants would rather stay at home amidst their families and extended social and economic networks as well as lifeways (food and language) than migrate for work and start anew. But extreme climate events leave marginalised individuals and households scrambling, which shifts the calculus in risk assessments by would-be migrants. Notably, such events cut short would-be migrants' planning, including saving money for their migration journey. Since the climate crisis often speeds up migrants' decision making, the most careful plans can go awry and ferry even the most seasoned migrants into situations of trafficking.

Time, thus, is a critical issue. A host of life-altering decisions can become rushed and compressed in the chaos after climate emergencies. In her article about 'climate brides' in South Asia, **Reetika Revathy Subramanian** reminds that although marriage can be a 'gendered strategy of survival' that offers 'social protection under conditions of precarity', we see the deleterious effects of sped up decision making because of the climate crisis. Time is also a theme in **Chris Weeks**' article on spectacularised interest in the alleged relationship between trafficking and disasters. After conducting interviews in the aftermath of a devastating typhoon in the Philippines, he found that there was no uptick in trafficking cases. Rather, over time, destroyed livelihoods can funnel people into accepting more precarious work and heighten the risk of human trafficking.

Benedikte Raft and Kolja Dahlin also take up similar themes in their article on what they call the gender-climate-mobility nexus in which climate change compounds pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities in Maithili Dalit women's lives in Nepal. The climate crisis is a 'risk amplifier' of caste-based exclusions, economic marginalisation, and immobility (in the face of male out-migration) such that they become mutually reinforcing.

Considerations and Future Directions

What will keep neoliberal capitalism going in ever-increasing extreme climate conditions? Employers will need more and more elaborate strategies to cheat and expire workers. While we have been witnessing the increasing ineffectiveness of existing worker protections to keep pace with climate-induced exploitation (let alone their enforcement), governments have been working closely with businesses to nibble away at worker rights. There are many thorny questions ahead.

As old forms of exploitation grow and new forms of abuse emerge, what will count as severe enough to warrant prevention, protection, and prosecution in the future? Do we expand existing policies and legal frameworks to reflect these new abuses or do we start anew? Do we resign ourselves to a dystopia where 'ever worse' becomes the norm? Or do we, as a society, undertake the large-scale restructuring necessary to ensure decent working conditions?

If we choose the latter, it will require a new understanding of trafficking that includes a vastly larger population of workers, along with a new commitment to workers' protections. As civil society, non-profits, and progressive policymakers labour to keep workers safe, employers and business-friendly policymakers will keep on inventing new modes of extraction.

Researchers must follow the lead of workers advocating for their colleagues and the planet. We should also look to past missed opportunities. The articles in this Special Issue push us to consider what went wrong—and right—with anti-trafficking legislation such as the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act or the UN Trafficking Protocol. The dawning of this anti-trafficking era offered a reset, a juncture at which to rethink policies related to border policing and migrant worker protections (including sex workers). It was a huge opportunity for nations and their economies to reckon with the paradox of essential yet disposable migrant labour. Twenty-five years later on a much hotter planet, we need to look back as we look forward and consider what should 'count' as trafficking when increasing numbers of workers labour in sites grievously altered by climate change.[19] Given the many criticisms of current anti-trafficking frameworks, particularly since they were handily hijacked to crack down on migrants and sex workers, it remains an open question whether to update them to reflect new forms of perilous labour.[20] The current anti-trafficking legal and social assistance regimes are

[19] D Brennan, 'Magical Thinking', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 121, issue 1, 2019, pp. 262-264, https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13181.

[20] As many activists, scholars, and attorneys around the globe have noted, anti-trafficking policies and programmes have been far more effective as punitive anti-sex work and migration controls than in assisting exploited individuals. See, for example, J Quirk, C Robinson, and C Thibos, 'Editorial: From Exceptional Cases to Everyday Abuses:

woefully unprepared to address the sheer number of workers whose livelihoods will depend upon them risking their lives in lethal working conditions created by incessant carbon emissions.

The intersection of the climate crisis, environmental degradation, and precarious work demands our attention as politically engaged researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The articles in this Special Issue offer a new direction, a 'climate turn', in critical social science on trafficking. It is our hope that these essays stir discussion around strategies and practices that build worker and migrant power and protections in times of multiple crises. Workers' health and well-being hang in the balance.

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Labour Exploitation in the Global Economy', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 15, 2020, pp. 1-19, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220151; J Musto, M Thakor, and B Gerasimov, 'Editorial: Between Hope and Hype: Critical Evaluations of technology's Role in Anti-Trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 14, 2020, pp. 1-14, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220141; and M G Giammarinaro, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children*, A/HRC/44/45, United Nations Human Rights Council, 6 April 2020.