

The Social Strike Game (Version 2.1)

- A Political Strategy Game by Red Plenty Games -

Ever dreamt about getting better wages?

Ever yearned to bring your city to a grinding halt?

Ever wanted to laugh and joke with your friends as you plot the downfall of capitalism?

...then this game is for you!

The Social Strike Game is a group strategy game that's fun for all the comrades. It's an opportunity to use your imagination to figure out ways that an array of different groups and resources in a city can co-ordinate to develop social struggle in a socialist direction, build community, deal with crises, respond to significant events, and smash capitalism. There are no correct answers in this game. Instead, judgements about the impact, fall-out, and transformations resulting from each group's suggestions are made by the Master(s) of Ceremony based on how well proposed they are. Although the authority of the MCs is absolute and unwavering, we hope and expect that this will cause disagreement and lively discussion. This is a game and as such it's supposed to be playful and entertaining. Like all good games though, we hope it has applications beyond the tabletop. Playing this game should get you thinking strategically and tactically about social struggles in the place where you actually live. What would it take to make a strike in the place you work sustainable for longer? How can a campaign you're involved in enter into a relationship of mutual support with a completely different campaign, bringing out what is common to both? How can skills that activists have developed in one specific context be shared and modified so that they can be used in another? Is it really plausible that your local pay-as-you-feel café could be the central hub of an armed uprising within half a year? What sort of structures would you need to create a city-wide social strike?

Wait... What actually is a 'social strike'?

Sorry, what? You don't know what a social strike is? It's only two words. How complicated can it be? OK let's discuss it. We'll start with the second word first.

The word 'strike' is familiar. It primarily refers to the collective withdrawal of labour in order to disrupt business as usual. However, the word strike is also applied to other forms of disruption that don't involve the withdrawal of labour. We talk about 'Rent Strikes', for instance, or 'Debt Strikes'. When we talk of 'Social Strikes' we have this expanded conception of a strike in mind.

The most straightforward idea of a social strike is a strike that takes place across the whole society, not just the workplace. That means rent strikes are already forms of social strike and indeed, classic workplace strikes often took on aspects of social strikes once they reached a certain level of scale. We want to promote the idea of the social strike now not to claim that everything we are talking about is absolutely new but to claim that there have been changes in the way we work and live that give the 'social' aspect of the strike a new prominence. The most obvious of these changes have been the break-up of the mass workplaces, or their displacement to the global South, and with this the dissolution of the relatively coherent communities that formed around them. This is important as these workplaces and communities were the bedrock upon which successful workplace strikes were previously built. On top of this change we can see other changes, such as the roll-out of pseudo-competitive markets under neoliberalism, increasingly precarious conditions of work and life, etc., which lead us to live much more individualised lives than we did previously. As a consequence, days lost to strike action are at historically low levels all around the developed world.

The 'Social' in 'Social Strike' then refers to two things. Firstly, the previously mentioned need to develop forms of action that disrupt business as usual, or the operation of capital, across the whole of the society; rent strikes, debt strikes, etc. Secondly, because of our highly individualised lives, these forms of action need to produce or find the kinds of collectivities, social but antagonistic to capital, that could almost be presupposed in the classic days of the workplace strike. In other words, we need to find ways to 'socialise' our strikes. Perhaps that will involve mobilising wider social force in solidarity with those at the sharp end of a struggle. Perhaps it will involve finding ways to redirect the effects of action so it disrupts the needs of management and capital rather than the needs of wider society. Perhaps it will involve building social infrastructure, and solidarity economies, that can form the basis for large scale, sustainable solidarity.

One final note: Classic discussion of strikes covered action with vastly different scope and ambition. Talk of the strike covered not just limited strikes to improve terms and conditions but also ideas of the 'General Strike' as a means of fundamentally changing society. While discussion of the social strike is useful in producing better forms of action in the here and now, we can also think of the social strike as a horizon towards which we want to move. Just as classic syndicalists in the twentieth century saw each limited strike as a step towards a general strike then we can see experiments with social strikes as steps towards 'Metropolitan' or 'City Strikes', which will bring whole cities to a stop. And beyond that... whole worlds.

Summary of Rules

The game is played over four turns lasting ten minutes each, with each turn representing a period of three months. One or two players play the part of the MC (Master of Ceremonies), who begin each turn by describing the situation within the city. Other players should form themselves into a group or groups of no more than ten people. One other player can take on the optional role of the Scribe, who takes notes on what happens over the course of the game, so players and MCs have a record of how their cities develop and change. If multiple groups are playing each group is considered to be playing in their own city with no connection to the other groups playing the game. All groups take their turns at the same time and are unable to collaborate with each other. During a turn, players may select any two resources from the list below and give each a separate task to complete. Players may choose to give both of their resources the same task if they have only one task they wish to carry out. This will increase the chance of success. A task is anything that could be considered a single project, for example organising a demonstration, running a series of workshops on eviction defence, producing a website with videos and articles supporting the aims of a strike or setting up a squatted social centre. The MCs may ask players to elaborate on the specifics of a task the players have set for a resource if they feel it necessary to understand how it will work. Once players have described their tasks the MC will decide how difficult each task would be to complete and assign an appropriate dice roll modifier, ranging from -2 to +2. An additional modifier of +2 is then added if players only gave their resources one task to complete. Players then roll two six-sided dice for each task they are attempting to complete. If the combined roll after the dice roll modifier has been taken into account is 0-6, the task fails. On a 7-9 it succeeds but there have been some unforeseen consequences. On a result of 10+ the task was an unqualified success. At the end of the fourth turn the game ends, and players will discover what has happened to their city after a year of interventions.

Resources

Before the start of the game the MC may alter this list of resources in any way they choose, either by removing resources or adding new ones of their own creation, to make the list more appropriate for the scenario they have devised. There is no limit to the amount of changes the MC can make.

- Local branch of Momentum: they have a fairly diverse and reasonably large membership from most areas of the city and have had a mixed relationship with the city's Labour politicians, backing some and coming into serious conflict with others
- A newly formed Renters' Union primarily based on a council estate, they are inexperienced but very motivated
- Deliveroo riders who engaged in a successful campaign against their local manager and who have unionised through the IWW

- A local anti-racist group that has been active in the city for some time. They have organised several well-publicised and effective actions against deportations and police brutality
- A migrant worker-led union who have been active for a few years, largely among workers in the logistics sector
- Pay-as-you feel cafes that are situated throughout the city. They are financially solvent and very popular locally
- Hack space that has been working on providing technical support for social justice projects as well as running skillshares
- Several small venues run by politically engaged artists and musicians, including a gig venue, art gallery and studio space
- An anti-fracking group that has been opposing efforts to begin fracking operations in an area close to the city, they are well organised and have extensive links to national and international environmentalist groups
- Women’s Assembly originally formed around the International Women’s Strike and now taking action on a variety of feminist issues in the city

MC Instructions

The following instructions are for players intending to take on the role of Master of Ceremonies. To avoid spoilers, any other players should stop reading now.

The role of the MC in the Social Strike Game is to clarify rules, keep time, decide on dice roll modifiers for tasks and provide the players with an environment that enables them to tell their own stories. The MC should not be trying to push players down a singular path, or come into the game with a preconceived idea of which resources players should use or the tasks they should assign them. Instead, the MC should always be striving to open options up for players and reward unexpected and original approaches. This is a game, not a scenario planning exercise. There’s not really a wrong way to go about it, and how you think any given approach would play out in the real world isn’t always relevant. Your job is to flesh out the world the players are working with, and to gently guide them towards trying new things and exploring interesting ideas.

The first task for the MC is to create a scenario. This can be done during the game, but we recommend preparing it in advance. To do this, select two of the events below. These will form the initial situation the MC presents to the players for their first turn. After the MC has selected two events, they feel will work well together they should come up with a description that sets the stage for the players, giving them a feel for how those events are interacting with each other (if they are) and what the general situation in the city is like. Where in the city are these events occurring, or are they citywide? Do any particular groups have a connection to the events? How are people in the city reacting to them? Next, the MC needs to select an additional event from the list for the three subsequent turns. These can be events that seem to follow on naturally from each other (for example, a financial crash in turn 2 leading to increased far-right mobilisation in turn 3), or they could be very disparate; it’s down to the MC to decide what they think works. When describing these events to the players remember that the MC will need to be flexible, since as the game progresses players will be shaping the city through their tasks. To show what a complete set of 4 turns looks like we’ve prepared one as an example that uses events 2 and 6 for the initial scenario and events 8, 4 and 17 for the three subsequent turns (see below). Feel free to use the example scenario for your game, or to substitute any of the events we’ve provided with ones of your own creation. Once you’ve created your scenario you may feel you need to tweak the list of resources. Feel free to do so.

Table of events

1. A strike has begun at a local bus company, which holds a virtual monopoly on services within the city. As the company were unprepared for the number of workers taking part, they have reduced their services to a fraction of what they were before, resulting in major disruption. Nevertheless, the company is refusing to negotiate with the union and insists on imposing new contracts that will freeze pay while increasing the unsociable hours drivers are forced to work.
2. The local council has approved the redevelopment of a council estate within the city by a private contractor

which will require the eviction of all tenants. The local council has given no guarantees that residents will be rehoused in the local area or even within the city. The new development will have a minimum of social housing but also large numbers of luxury flats as well as a shopping and leisure complex.

3. Severe flooding strikes the city, destroying homes and businesses that had not previously been seen as a flood risk. Waters are still high, and many people remain trapped in their homes or places of work, and advance warning from the authorities had been limited. Emergency services seem overwhelmed by the scale of the floods, and many people are missing.
4. European truck drivers are striking and carrying out rolling blockades of key logistics sites such as ports and airports. They are demanding legislative action to prevent the introduction of driverless vehicles which they believe are an imminent threat to their livelihoods. The distribution of goods across Europe has been severely disrupted, but haulage, shipping, and technology firms are fiercely resisting any attempt to legislate against their plans to increase automation of their businesses.
5. Teachers have declared a series of one-day strikes, demanding a reduction in their working hours which they argue have become unsustainable. The strikes are planned to begin in a week's time and will involve teachers refusing to work one day every two weeks. Many schools in the city have already declared that they will be forced to close on the strike days, as they will not have enough staff to ensure the safety of the children.
6. A local shipping warehouse is significantly automating its operations by the introduction of self-driving forklifts and increased computerisation of order processing and general admission. Almost all of the workforce have been made redundant and a significant number of other employers are considering taking similar measures to automate the logistical sides of their own businesses, which could potentially result in thousands of people being made unemployed.
7. Due to disastrous Brexit negotiations causing a massive drop in inward investment and the economy looking likely to fall into recession the government has announced plans to introduce sweeping liberalisation of labour laws. The legislation appears to be backed by a majority of MPs, who argue it is necessary to attract investment and prevent massive job losses and will be voted on in one month's time.
8. A local newspaper discovers extensive links between local politicians and a private firm contracted to carry out an extremely expensive infrastructure project. Though no clear evidence of illegal activity has been uncovered many local people are convinced it's been happening, and at best family members and close friends of elected officials have been benefitting from contracts. The story has had a lot of attention in the city and has led to widespread anger.
9. The city has been chosen to test a universal basic income scheme. Residents who are full British citizens and aged over 21 will be eligible for a payment of £1000 a month tax-free, regardless of their employment status. The payment of all unemployment and disability benefits for those eligible for the scheme has been suspended. It is scheduled to last for a minimum of 1 year but may be continued or rolled out nationally dependent on its outcome.
10. A national far-right organisation has become increasingly active in the city. It has opened a social centre and is providing a number of services to "ethnically British" people, including sports clubs, a food bank and social events. In interviews with the media, they have repeatedly stressed that they are non-violent and insisted that their project is "no different to any other community organisation that caters to a particular ethnic group".
11. Extreme weather conditions have led to a disastrous harvest in many parts of the world, including most of Europe. Food prices have increased significantly, and while grocers remain well-stocked in the short-term shortages of food are expected within the next few weeks.
12. A national election has resulted in a Labour minority government, relying on the support of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens to pass legislation. Their programme is broadly social democratic, promising renationalisation of the railways, improvements in workers' and tenants' rights, and greater environmental protections including a ban on fracking. They have also promised to keep welfare benefits at their current low levels and are offering no changes to the current asylum and immigration or prison systems.
13. A new system of local government is being introduced to the city. An elected mayor will be introduced, along with much greater local control over transport, healthcare and housing, The Mayor will be elected in two months' time. The current leader in the polls is the prospective Labour candidate, a former MP who argues for a neoliberal approach in the same vein as Sadiq Khan or Andy Burnham.
14. A sudden financial crash hits the global economy, initially blamed on another housing bubble crashing after a drop in overseas investment coinciding with the collapse in value of complex financial instruments similar to those involved in the 2008 financial crash. A bank with several branches and a call centre based in the city

looks close to collapse, and other employers will almost certainly follow them down as lenders are curtailing their activities and share prices plummet.

15. The national economy has entered into a recession, with prices rising while average wages fall. So far, few companies have ceased trading or made staff redundant, but the government appears to have no plan to intervene in the crisis beyond urging for austerity and it is expected that more people will lose their jobs or have their wages slashed over the coming months, while the cost of living creeps higher and higher.
16. The city seems to be entering a period of calm, and it does not seem as if a major crisis will occur over the next three months.
17. The events of the past three months have escalated.

Example Scenario

Turn 1

The game environment is a major English city, somewhere similar in size to Leeds or Manchester. The local council is controlled by the Labour Party who hold an outright majority, while the national government is Conservative. A campaign has begun in the city to oppose the redevelopment of a large housing estate which will cause the displacement of several thousand people in favour of new luxury flats with a small allocation of social housing, as well as a new office and retail park. The council supports the redevelopment despite its widespread unpopularity across the city and has not committed to ensuring residents will be rehoused anywhere near their current homes, or even within the local authority area. Many of the estate's residents are EU migrant workers employed at one of several shipping warehouses located on an industrial estate just outside the redevelopment zone. One of these companies has just laid off 36 people, the vast majority of its workforce, after introducing self-driving forklifts and robotic order pickers. There are concerns over whether other local employers will follow suit, potentially leading to mass unemployment due to the importance of logistics to the local economy.

Turn 2

A local newspaper has revealed the deep links between many of the city's Labour councillors and the firm overseeing the proposed redevelopment of the estate. The anger this produces locally causes the leader of the council to step down, as do several of their colleagues. The revelations are such that people suspect councillors may have acted illegally, and in the minds of many locals this has now become a certainty. Neighbouring authorities are asked to step in and assist with the running of certain vital services. The response of local MPs has been muted, limited to condemning "any wrongdoing that may have occurred", before returning their attention to national concerns. The result is a total absence of local political leadership with any legitimacy.

Turn 3

Local logistics workers are not the only ones who have concerns about automation. Truck drivers in France and Spain have begun extensive disruption of supply routes, carrying out blockades of ports and distribution hubs, to protest recent EU legislation legalising self-driving trucks. The strikes are being supported by a variety of European left-wing groups, though the major parties in the affected countries are uniformly condemnatory. While these vehicles have not yet arrived on the market their introduction is seen as imminent, and the truck drivers believe they are at imminent risk of losing their jobs. As the strike begins to gain traction in Germany and the Netherlands supplies of even basic goods to your city are disrupted including food, medicines and fuel. UK ports do remain open, but if blockades continue people will soon be unable to acquire basic necessities.

Turn 4

The European truck drivers' strike has spread to Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Belgium, Sweden and now even the UK. British hauliers are blockading ports as they fear the same fate as their continental colleagues and see the logistics operations carried out in your city as a prime target for blockades. The flow of commodities is now in total chaos across Europe and the strike has caused major disruption to the global economy, with share prices plummeting globally while banks are tightening their lending in fear of an imminent crash.

Playing the Game

Once your scenario is ready, the game can begin. During each turn, after reading out the rules, answering any queries players have and describing the scenario, the MC should keep track of the time and let players know when their ten minutes is nearly up so they can finalise their tasks. If players finish their deliberations before the ten minutes end feel free to end the turn early. Once the time is up the MC should ask players to describe their tasks, asking for additional details if they feel they are needed either to understand how the tasks would affect the city or simply to paint a clearer and more entertaining picture. "The Renters' Union holds a demonstration" is a task, but more questions should be asked if that's all players give. Where is the demonstration held? What kind of tactics are used? What are its demands (if any)? Once the tasks are clear to the MC, they must decide what the chances of success for the action are and assign an appropriate dice roll modifier, ranging from -2 for an extremely difficult task to +2 for a task that seems virtually guaranteed to succeed. To give MCs a clearer idea of what modifier to apply we've provided some examples and further explanation of the kind of difficulty each modifier should represent and what factors should be taken into consideration when applying it:

-2 - This modifier represents a task that is incredibly difficult to succeed at. Some tasks would inherently be this difficult no matter the circumstances, i.e., attempting to overthrow the government or declaring the city to be an independent state. Other tasks would be given this modifier if they are extremely out of character for the resource attempting them or there should have been more preparation before the attempt was made i.e., the branch of Momentum suddenly splitting from Labour to take up insurrectionist anarchism or the pay-as-you-feel cafes organising an attack on a fascist meeting.

-1 - A difficult task or one that is unusual for a particular resource to take on would be given this modifier. Difficult tasks would include most illegal or physically dangerous activities (unless the group seemed particularly well-suited to them or had made excellent preparations in previous turns) as well as anything that requires the mass mobilisation of a large percentage of the city's populace (unless circumstances in the game make it clear this is likely to happen). Examples of groups taking on tasks that would be well outside their normal activities could include the hack space providing catering for a festival or the art gallery organising a protest camp.

0 - If the MC thinks there are no factors that would make the task more likely to succeed than fail then this modifier should be applied. This could mean a difficult task the resource is well-equipped to take on, such as the renters' union trying to defeat evictions on a housing estate, or a relatively straightforward task that's out of character for a resource, like the Deliveroo Riders organising a demonstration on an issue unrelated to precarious work. If an MC is in doubt which modifier to select it's usually safest to default to this option.

+1 - If a resource is taking on a task it's well-suited to, has made excellent preparations for or simply isn't that hard then apply this modifier. Examples could include the Black Lives Matter group organising a demonstration against police brutality or the Pay-As-You-Feel cafes delivering leaflets on a housing estate opposing potential evictions.

+2 - This modifier should be reserved for when a resource is taking on a task that seems sure to succeed. Generally, this would mean a resource attempting something that falls well within its day-to-day operations, such as the Women's Assembly organising a public meeting or the Renters' Union running a stall in the city centre giving out information on housing struggles. The modifier could also be applied if a resource has put substantial effort into a difficult task, such as the Anti-Fracking group setting up a protest camp, they have been using their turns to organise for the previous three rounds.

An additional modifier of +2 is also applied whenever players use both of their resources to carry out one single task instead of one task for each resource as is the norm. This is applied on top of the modifier for difficulty and does not replace it. Therefore, a task the MC thinks has a difficulty of -2 would end up with a modifier of 0 while a task with a modifier of +2 would receive a final modifier of +4.

Once the roll has been made and the modifiers applied, the MC needs to check whether the result is a failure, partial success or unqualified success. On a result of 0-6 whatever task the resource was attempting completely fails. A result of 7-9 is a partial success, meaning the resource did achieve its aims but there was an unexpected negative consequence. If a result of 10 or above is achieved the task has been an unqualified success. Once the MC knows the kind of results the players achieved, they need to bring those results to life by describing what happens. If a task was an unqualified success players should be given a positive consequence of their actions that is connected to the task,

they set their resource. You can find a list of examples of positive consequences below, as well as a list of negative consequences to be used when a task has failed. If a task achieves partial success, then players should be given one positive and one negative consequence, though the negative consequence should be something that has less impact than the positive.

Some examples of positive consequences for players are:

- > Expand a resource – Tell the players one of their resources has grown significantly in number. For example, the housing action group could swell in size to number the vast majority of the estate’s residents. This can be useful to avoid players spending too many tasks on recruitment, and allow them to get onto something more interesting
- > Give a resource more power – One resource can be given something they control which would be available in subsequent turns. For example, the Momentum group could take decisive control of the city council after a snap election. A good tactic for when you think players should have a bit more to work with and need to see some concrete gains from their actions.
- > Change the mood in the city – The general feeling in the local area should come up after most tasks, but to reward players the MC could say that a majority of the populace are now firmly in favour of a particular tactic or resource. For example, after a successful task by the Black Lives Matter group road blockades will now be supported by a majority of drivers who encounter them. Useful when you think players should be encouraged to pursue an interesting direction.
- > Strengthen a connection – This can be between two (or more) resources or between resources and other groups or organisations. This is particularly useful to encourage players to continue down an interesting route they’ve taken, or to give a little direction to players who are struggling for ideas. For example, the Deliveroo riders could now have an excellent relationship with a national network of Uber drivers. A good way to get players to explore collaboration.
- > Remove a problem – Something the players were working to create or prevent resolves in their favour. For example, superb strike work by the union results in employers promising unequivocally that they will not make anyone redundant. Can be used to reward players or to get them out of wasting too much time on something you know to be a bit of a red herring

Some examples of negative consequences for players are:

- > Reduce a resource – A resource can get smaller in size, perhaps due to inactivity, burnout or drifting away from its original purpose. For example, the anti-fracking group might lose members if it’s used exclusively for activism with little clear connection to environmentalism. Handy for getting players to stop using the same resources and try something new.
- > Destroy a resource – Take a resource out of the game, either for a set number of turns or permanently. For example, the Momentum group might break up due to conflict with local Labour councillors and all the real action being in extra-parliamentary politics. Use this to get rid of dead wood, to throw your players an interesting twist or push back against them if they’ve gone a bit off the deep end and set a ridiculously overly ambitious task.
- > Change the mood in the city – As before in the positive column, but this time it takes a turn for the worse. For example, a massive free party held by local musicians backfires and turns local opinion against them after fights break out. This is good for getting people to try a different tactic.
- > Destroy or weaken a connection – Two groups might fall out, or lose touch due to not working together enough. For example, the pay-as-you-feel cafes had developed a good relationship with a group of small farmers, but the relationship is in danger of breaking down after no plans were made to exploit it. A way to gently (or not so gently) encourage players to utilise connections, or to throw some interesting tension that needs to be resolved into the path of a group of players who’ve had things a little too smooth.

The role of the Scribe is optional, unlike that of the MC, but it can be incredibly useful for someone to take it on, particularly in games where multiple groups are playing simultaneously. The job of the Scribe is to take notes on the scenario and events the MC describes, what tasks each group of players sets its resources, whether they succeed or fail and the changes in each city described by the MC. It's best to display these notes in a way that can be seen by everyone participating, so players and the MC have a reference to remind them of what happened on previous turns. Once a game is over the notes can also allow participants to reflect on what went well and what didn't, compare their choices and have a record of the changes they made to their cities.

Additional notes

If you feel your game would benefit from adding new and different resources to the ones we provided, creating your own events or changing any of the rules or descriptions in the game whatsoever then we heartily encourage you to do so. This version of the game was written by people living in a city in the north of England, and our selection of setting, resources and events reflect that.

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