

'Hambi stays!': Thousands join German forest demo in anti-coal battle

October 6 2018, by Michelle Fitzpatrick



A banner reads "Hambi for Bambi" as thousands of demonstrators gather to celebrate the suspension of the planned razing of the forest in what they dubbed the region's "biggest-ever anti-coal rally"

Thousands of anti-coal demonstrators descended on Germany's

Hambach forest Saturday, celebrating an unexpected court victory that suspended an energy company's planned razing of the woodland to expand a giant open-cast mine.

The ancient forest near Cologne has been occupied by activists for the past six years and become a symbol of resistance against [coal energy](#) in Germany, a country that despite its green reputation remains heavily reliant on this dirtiest of fossil fuels.

Basking in early autumn sunshine, young people, families and pensioners flocked to a field next to Hambach forest, a day after a court in Muenster said it needed more time to consider an environmental complaint against RWE's upcoming clearing operations.

Organisers said 50,000 people had turned out for what they called the region's "biggest-ever anti-[coal](#) rally". Police however did not confirm the figure.

Chanting "Hambi bleibt!" (Hambi stays) and cheering loudly, the crowd listened to live music and speeches in a festival-like atmosphere.

Many held up banners and balloons demanding an immediate exit from coal energy.

"The mood is great," said Greenpeace spokeswoman Gesche Juergens, welcoming "the strong signal" sent by the court.

"But it's only a first step. The battle goes on to start phasing out coal."

The forest's days had appeared numbered after its owner RWE announced plans to clear half of the remaining 200 hectares (500 acres) from October 15 to expand its massive nearby open-pit coal mine.

Police last month began dismantling activists' treehouses in a forced eviction that took nearly three weeks and fanned public sympathy for the activists' cause.

Tragedy struck when a freelance journalist covering the evictions died on September 19 after falling through a walkway suspended between two trees.



"Stop coal - RWE hands off Hambach" reads a poster close to the forest, whose days had appeared numbered before a court ruling which prompted a Greenpeace spokeswoman to hail what she termed a first step in the battle to phase out coal

Demonstrators at the rally held a moment's silence in honour of the victim, Steffen Meyns.

Saved by a bat

RWE on Friday said it believed a final judgement in the court case could take until late 2020, sending its share price plunging—the mention of which was greeted with loud applause at the demo.

The energy firm has long argued that the expansion of Hambach mine in Germany's industrial heartland of North Rhine-Westphalia state is necessary to fuel [coal-fired power plants](#) in the region—which are among the most polluting in the European Union.

But judges said RWE had not sufficiently proved that renewed logging was urgently needed to ensure energy supply.

The plaintiffs in the case, environmental group BUND, meanwhile are arguing that the forest is home to rare species like Bechstein's bat and therefore qualifies as a protected area under EU legislation.

The fight has taken on fresh urgency as it comes just as a government-appointed coal committee is discussing an end-date for coal in a bid to combat climate change.

Germany gets around 40 percent of its energy from coal, contributing significantly to the country's [carbon dioxide emissions](#) and undermining Chancellor Angela Merkel's role as a leading advocate of the Paris Climate Agreement.

'They can't keep us down'

Buoyed by the court's temporary reprieve, demonstrators said they were hopeful Hambach forest could be saved.

"I have faith. So much can happen in two years' time, they'll have no choice but to keep the forest," said 43-year-old teacher Julia.



Activists have occupied the ancient forest for six years, their protest a symbol of opposition to dirty coal, and they had cause to celebrate—the graffiti reads Hambach stays—after a court suspended razing of the woodland

"I hope so," her son Arne, 10, chimed in.

But forest occupiers were more muted in their celebrations, saying it had

been a bitter experience to watch police tear down more than 80 treehouses they had built with their bare hands.

"It's a double feeling," said Musel, a dreadlocked man in his early 50s who was twice dragged out of the trees by police and even wrapped himself in barbed wire.

"The court's decision is a step in the right direction... but the people who have lived here for years are traumatised."

But he added that the activists were unbowed, and that the rebuilding had already begun.

"The first hammocks are already back up," he smiled.

"They can't keep us down."

At the edge of the [forest](#), demonstrators paused to take in the sweeping view of RWE's open-pit mine.

Two coal plants in the distance were belching clouds of smoke into the sky, while dozens of wind turbines dotted the horizon.

"One is the future, the other is the past," mused 40-year-old local resident Benjamin.

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