

Europe's growing 'climate civil disobedience' movement

June 19 2019

Thousands of European activists plan to blockade a large German lignite mine this week, the latest protest of a growing "climate civil disobedience" movement.

While [school students](#) have held "Fridays for Future" rallies for months, protesters of the "Extinction Rebellion" group launched in Britain have risked arrest with more confrontational protests.

From next Thursday to Monday, Europe's veteran "Ende Gelaende" (EG) anti-coal activists will hold their sixth large-scale blockade of an open-pit coal mine and [power plants](#) run by German energy giant RWE.

The group's online "action consensus" says: "In view of the urgency of the climate crisis, we consider it necessary and appropriate to go one step further: from public protest to civil disobedience."

Here is a look at this growing form of environmental activism.

Illegal but non-violent

Tadzio Mueller, a German organiser of the movement, argues that "massively breaking the rules ... is the only thing that works to prevent the status quo in the face of climate chaos".

Azna Lecuyer of the French branch of Ende Gelaende agrees that "we

feel a passion for actions of civil disobedience, especially among young people.

"This is reflected in demand for training courses everywhere and by the very rapid rise in skills of new activists."

Lecuyer stresses that "non-violence is part of our action consensus: it is forbidden to harm the security forces, site employees or to damage the equipment".

During past protests at the nearby Hambacher Forest, police and RWE company staff have accused the most militant protesters of having hurled rocks or molotov cocktails.

The Ende Gelaende movement has distanced itself from those environmental militants and any acts of violence.

How does a blockade work?

The EG activists—dressed in trademark white overalls symbolising the toxicity of fossil fuels—plan to march from their protest camp to the Garzweiler mine about 10 kilometres (six miles) away.

They hope to evade police roadblocks and enter the vast open-pit mining area to occupy strategic locations and "technical infrastructure such as rails, access roads and excavators".

Meanwhile they plan to organise in so-called affinity groups of up to 10 people of similar physical fitness—and a willingness to be arrested for trespassing and other offences.

Before the protest, activists attend training workshops to learn non-violent resistance techniques such as locking their arms and legs in

formation with names such as "the little train" or "the turtle".

What risks do protesters take?

Occupying an industrial site is illegal under German law, and volunteer legal advisers are on hand to support activists before and after they are arrested. They advise them to say as little as possible while in custody.

Other risks lurk at the Garzweiler site. A vast moonscape-like terrain where the surface can be unstable after rain or drought, it is criss-crossed by high-power cables and dug up by building-sized excavators.

When breaking up protesters' blockades, German police have in the past employed high-powered [water jets](#) and pepper spray.

Lecuyer says that some activists experience a form of "trauma ... due to the high emotions from stress and excitement and the physical effort, because you have to walk for miles in groups to the target, pass police roadblocks, sometimes under water cannon or pepper spray, and then hold the blockade".

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Citation: Europe's growing 'climate civil disobedience' movement (2019, June 19) retrieved 22 September 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2019-06-europe-climate-civil-disobedience-movement.html>

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