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Germany

The fight for the Hambach forest: impressions of the weekend of victory

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV525 - October 2018 -

Publication date: Tuesday 30 October 2018

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"Hambi bleibt!" ("Hambi rest!" The rallying cry of the movement. Hambi is an affectively charged abbreviation.) The long, mass citizens' struggle to protect the Hambach woods near Cologne, threatened by the extension of a lignite mine, has won a major, albeit partial, victory.

On 6 October in a nearby meadow, 50,000 people celebrated the cessation of deforestation decided the previous day by the Regional Administrative Court of Münster. This demonstration, the largest ever seen here, was organized by the three major organizations BUND [1], Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, in association with Campact [2], and supported by the associations "Buirer für Buir" ("The inhabitants of Buir for Buir"), "Ende Gelände" [3] and many, many more. It was like in the 1980s in Kalkar. [4] In the course of the afternoon, by the local roads and the departmental roads, a continuous flow of groups converged on the meeting place. Trains from Cologne were emptied every quarter of an hour at Buir station, while the police had set up from 10 a.m. a shuttle bus between Horrem and Buir. Buses arrived from the nearby Bergisches Land, from the Ruhr, but also from Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden ...

And that was anything but ephemeral. For weeks, thousands of people (including many young people) have been coming on weekends with the will to take back the forest: 7,000 a fortnight ago, 12,000 last week, 50,000 now. And that is not all: on Sunday, "Lebenslaute" [5] played in front of the Hambach lignite extraction site and 1400 people once again participated in the educational walk in the forest, guided by Michael Zobel. On Sunday 14th, there will be a big demonstration by bike from Cologne; then two weeks later, from the 25th to the 29th, the mass action of civil disobedience against the coal mines of the Rhine basin organized by "Ende Gelände".

The goal of all these actions is to occupy the forest again. At the beginning of September, there were still more than fifty houses in the trees, they were all destroyed. But with admirable obstinacy, young people use every opportunity to break into the forest and rebuild new ones. As the former spokesperson of Buirer für Buir, Antje Grothus, regularly points out, without them, the forest would have been cut down a long time ago. This is the reason why she is fighting so hard so that the different forms of action, from the religious services for peace in front of the Saint Lambert parish church in Immerath (which was victim in January of the destructive madness of the electricity producer RWE) to tree occupations, are not opposed to each other. She has been unceasingly building bridges between the different groups and up to now she has succeeded in getting everyone to pull in the same direction.

Diverse as those who have come together around this cause may be, there is no secret central committee that is pulling all the strings, but on the contrary a consensus around the fact that all the forms of action are on an equal footing and that no one should be a danger to others or put in doubt the legitimacy of the struggle in public opinion. This allows each component of this large and diverse movement to contribute in its own way to success, thereby greatly increasing its surface area.

The media and scientists have also made their contribution. We cannot really say that the media are on the side of RWE, and all that it has done, with the active support of the union federation of the DGB "Mines-Chemicals-Energy" (IG BCE), to present the protesters as supporters of violence and as wreckers - which has rebounded against them. As for the scientists, since the official commission on the future of coal began its work, they have made numerous reports which not only establish the urgency - and the possibility! - of abandoning coal immediately, but also underline that to succeed, this turning point must be socially fair. All this provides the militants with valuable ammunition.

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Many former members of the anti-nuclear movement rediscovered what they had experienced around Wackersdorf [6]. One point stands out: here too, the movement draws a good deal of its strength from its rectitude, and its extraordinary ability to resist, from some inhabitants of the area who do not let themselves be diverted from their path and who could never have imagined that they would one day make common cause with activists of the far left, or that they would be in the spotlight. In Wackersdorf, it was the local councillor Hans Schuierer, in Buir the environmental defender Antje Grothus, for whom her militant commitment earned a place on the "Coal Commission". In her speeches at events, Antje speaks more clearly and in a more radical way, in the good sense of the word, than any of the environmental organizations, associations and committees, including the "tree occupiers".

There is another point in common with Wackersdorf: for such a movement, which is crossing swords with a powerful industrial group linked to political power, to meet with success, "the climate must be favourable", i.e. the state of mind of society must reinforce the mobilization. We reached this stage in Wackersdorf (whereas what was at stake was nothing less than the dream of Germany finally gaining the ability to manufacture atomic bombs), only in the last phase of the mobilization, with the arrival of Gorbachev in power in the USSR and the subsequent thaw. Germany's access to a possible military use of the atom had become untimely.

For the Hambach forest, the opposite has happened. Here, for a long time, there had been protest movements, "climate camps," too, which found almost no echo in public opinion. It was above all the United Nations climate summit in Paris that produced a change, and a greater awareness of the urgency of combating climate change. Activists of "ausgeCO 2hlt" [7] and others have held "climate camps", with each year a greater influx, against the coal mines of the Rhine basin, "Ende Gelände" organized effectively massive successful blockades in open-cast mines. Moreover, it was not limited to the Rhine region, but was taken up in Poland and the Czech Republic. Small groups specialized in sabotage actions, others set up large training programmes. The coordinating committee of "trade unionists for the protection of the climate" set itself the goal of changing the positions of the unions, the environmental organizations published reports of experts and took legal action, the Catholics organized religious services ...

To sum up, in Germany, the climate movement has become a mass movement and has found in the Hambach forest a place from which to organize and radiate. But it is necessary to make it clear that the centrepiece is the forest guide Michael Zobel and his educational walks in the forest of Hambach, first monthly, then weekly since August. It is a fixed point for the movement, because it is unifying, at the same time as influencing to those who come out of curiosity: once they have come once, they will stay. Without these forest walks, the movement would never have made the leap that made it massive. One afternoon, there were up to 10,000 walkers.

Without him, without the "Buirer für Buir", without the "tree occupiers", without "Ende Gelände", without BUND, there would not be this broad mobilization. But without the change in the collective consciousness that the Paris climate summit initiated and the hot summer of this year has further accelerated, the terrain would not be so favourable. The decision of the court in Münster cannot be explained otherwise. What is particularly important here is that in Germany a higher judicial authority accords as much importance to a protected species (a bat) as to the economic interests of an energy giant, which it further reproaches for not having made a credible demonstration of the indispensable character for the common good of its activity. This is a huge success for the protection of nature and the climate. RWE was not expecting it; moreover, it was also a surprise for many of the activists.

Is this already total victory? No, the fight for the abandonment of carbon energy remains hard manual labour [8]. RWE is digging a ditch around the forest to prevent people from continuing to enter and to continue to do whatever it wants. For a while there was talk of building a fence a metre high around the forest, but there is no longer any question of that, perhaps it is too expensive. It is not forbidden to go into the forest, but it will be forbidden to build huts. RWE has integrated the forest into the domain of the company. Thus, the company has the possibility to have the "tree occupiers" arrested for trespassing and to suffocate them with large fines.

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In fact, it is too late to put this strategy in place, it only makes sense if RWE wanted to use the fence to remove from the forest the most valuable symbol of what there is to preserve there: the bats called "Murin de Bechstein". Once already RWE tried to drive them out of the forest by covering with plastic sheets the cavities of the old trees in which they nest. At that time the ecologists who were on the terrain denounced these actions and got them stopped. If they can no longer come and keep watch, RWE will do whatever it wants. That may sound rather cynical. How can we attribute such ideas to them? German capitalists have, however, proved several times in history that they do not become wiser when they have their back to the wall, and that they choose the tactics of destruction.

In any case, thanks to our mass mobilization, and the fact that RWE is so obviously clinging to outdated technology, the energy producer has been forced onto a defensive position, and the BCE union along with it. This week-end RWE received the bill: the price of its shares fell by nearly 10 per cent on Friday, accompanied by a new wave of termination of contracts by its customers. Year after year, RWE makes 100 to 200 million euros less profit. Meanwhile polls show that the SPD and the CDU continue their descent into hell while the Grünen see their support rising. This will not be without consequences for the decisions of the "Coal Commission".

That is why "Ende Gelände" is right to call on people to continue to go into the forest, to occupy trees and to continually refill the ditch. At least until the courts have decided the main question, whether the forest should be declared to the European Commission as falling under the directive on the conservation of natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora, environmental activists must closely survey what RWE does in the forest.

And after this weekend, a second thing is becoming obvious: the movement for the climate must win over the cities. It must make alliances with small farmers and promoters of alternative means of transport, and to counter the prevailing madness, develop counterproposals much more concrete than has been the case up until now, capable of becoming axes of battle on the political level. It was from Munich that this same weekend there came a first big initiative: nearly 20,000 people demonstrated on the theme "Mia ham's satt! " ["We are fed up !" in the Bavarian dialect.] against increasing concrete construction, industrial farms and the asphyxiation of transport. Activists from "Ende Gelände" and many others expressed their solidarity with the fight for the Hambach forest.

8 October 2018

This article was published on the website of the ISO (International Socialist Organization, German Section of the Fourth International), <http://intersoz.org/hambi-bleibt/>.

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[1] The largest organization for the protection of nature and the environment, with around 450,000 members.

[2] A citizens' network that conducts public opinion campaigns, and has collected 830,000 signatures for the maintenance of the Hambach forest.

[3] "Stop the Coal, Protect the Climate!" A militant movement of civil disobedience that has organized a multiplicity of actions <https://www.ende-gelaende.org/en/>.

[4] A very important struggle against the construction of a breeder reactor that has never been commissioned.

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[5] A group of classical orchestra musicians and choristers who get together for protest concerts in places where they are not expected.

[6] A reprocessing plant for used nuclear reactor fuels was to be located there. The struggle, which lasted from 1981 to 1989, was victorious.

[7] A difficultly translatable word game with the words "dig", "CO 2 ", "out of" and "coal". The expression of miners to designate exhausted sites is "ausgekohlt". This radical movement exists in the region of Cologne and Bonn and declares itself "against nuclear and fossil capitalism". It organizes massive and dynamic actions. "We do not stick to the legal framework and so we create justice."

[8] Kohleausstieg bleibt Handarbeit. This comes from an expression used mainly by highly radicalized and anti-party sectors of the climate movement to signify the refusal to trust the government and their conferences, parties, large NGOs and associations; we cannot "convince" elites or public opinion, we do not expect anything from them, we must take things into our own hands. Allusion to both "direct actions" like the destruction of fences, and the need for grassroots work, with people, long-term.