



UK: Extinction Rebellion paralyses London

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Extinction Rebellion (XR) captured the headlines of the mainstream media and the imagination of millions this Easter, as its activists occupied key tourist locations and major traffic arteries in London for a week or more.

Their courageous actions encouraged thousands more to join their ranks as TV screens broadcast their endeavours into homes here and across the globe. Trade unionists, school students and passers-by visited their sites in Marble Arch, Parliament Square, Oxford Circus, Waterloo Bridge and Piccadilly, with more than enough signing up and joining the environmentalist group to replace the 834 arrested ? and counting. In fact the more the police moved in to break up the protests, the more people were inspired to join their ranks.

Their stated aim was to raise public awareness of the catastrophic state of the earth?s climate and the hurtling rate at which we are approaching the point of no return, when climate change becomes irreversible: 2025 on the reckoning of the most recent scientific projections.

They also wished to contrast the selfless actions of their supporters, putting themselves in the way of immediate danger, to the seemingly endless inaction and delay of the politicians and industrialists overseeing the destruction of habitats and (mainly poor) people?s dwellings.

Who are XR?

Extinction Rebellion are less than a year old. A gathering together of various climate campaigns, notably Rising Up!, they were dominated ? and still are ? by academics, albeit academic activists with a knowledge of and commitment to the methods of past environmental and non-violent direct action (NVDA) movements. As well as how to use social media.

Their most prominent public faces include Roger Haslam, Gail Bradbrook and Simon Bramwell, all originally in Rising Up! Their activities started in London but have spread across the UK, primarily as a result of the school student strikes.

The group?s first public act was for a hundred of them to sign an open letter calling for actions in October 2018 to highlight their call for a climate emergency. Various actions led to a pattern of arrests, where the activists offer no resistance except the dead weight of their body and various means of obstructing their removal, ranging from superglue to locks.

The following month, in November, the School Strikes 4 Climate movement, started by Greta Thurnberg in Sweden, went global: from Australia to Austria, from the US to the UK. Soon it spread to Columbia and Uganda, i.e. to those parts of the world, in reality semi-colonies of the great powers, that suffer most from the pollution of the US, EU and China.

In the UK at least, this led to a soft fusion of the two movements, at least by the 15 February strike, when school students stood up to and ran around the police and were joined by some university students. XR Youth was formed and plays an increasingly important part in organising affinity groups, self-organised activists with a common goal.

Greta travelled for two days by train to visit the London protests, having given up air transport two years ago. There she met with leading members of all political parties, Jeremy Corbyn, Ed Miliband and Caroline Lucas, as you would

expect, but also Tory Environment Secretary Michael Gove.

Greta ripped into the Tories, who have spent the past nine years dismantling the few reforms Labour had achieved in the previous nine. In particular she pointed out that the UK's public figures for carbon emission reductions excluded aviation, shipping and imports/exports. When these are included, Britain's emissions have not dropped by 37 per cent since 1990 but only by 10 per cent, i.e. 0.4 per cent a year.

However, Gove, smarmy as ever, simply replied, "I know I haven't done enough, very few politicians have" the one thing that I would ask is that we keep the conversation going." The point Thurnberg and the movement are making, however, is that the time for talking is over; we need action.

Aims and methods

The only way to guard against the establishment attempting to house-train the movement is to present clear and precise demands that meet the needs of the situation and out of which people like Gove cannot wriggle.

So what are XR's aims? According to their website, they are:

- ? The Government must tell the truth about the climate and wider ecological emergency, reverse inconsistent policies and work alongside the media to communicate with citizens.
- ? The Government must enact legally binding policy measures to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 and to reduce consumption levels.
- ? A national Citizens' Assembly to oversee the changes, as part of creating a democracy fit for purpose.

Despite the slogan commonly associated with XR, "System Change Not Climate Change!", there is nothing in this that envisages changing the system, be that social, political or economic. The agents of change are to be the government and the media, two of the most discredited institutions in hock to big money. And without a demand for the expropriation of the fossil fuel, transport and manufacturing industries, it leaves it in the hands of private corporations to deliver.

The Citizen's Assembly, which they describe as consisting of 100-1,000 randomly chosen people, who deliberate for months and years, digesting and debating the data and arguments of scientists, is to be sovereign over the government.

This is utopian in one country, let alone globally, and highly undemocratic; it takes power out of the hands of the elected government on the one hand, while denying the people a say in its decisions and methods on the other. More likely XR envisage a non-binding consultative exercise, which the Irish government had no problem in organising for the same-sex marriage referendum.

No, XR is neither anti-capitalist nor socialist. It depends on its startling scientific conclusions for its punch. The call to reduce carbon emissions to zero in just six years. Likewise, it took its name from the Sixth Holocene Extinction, which says there have been five global events, mostly related to climate change, which have wiped out, each time, 70-80 per cent of the species on the planet, which means some larger creatures, dinosaurs, woolly mammoths, etc. disappeared. XR believe we are on the cusp of, or have already started the sixth.

Socialism

We have no reason to disbelieve XR's conclusions on climate change. That is a matter for scientists to debate. We know that the matter is pressing and potentially catastrophic. But their political aims and methods of struggle are wanting.

It is, as the youth firmly believe, the CAPITALIST system that we need to change. So long as the global economy is in the hands of rival capitalist blocs, no international co-operation on climate change will be possible. We need to take over the big energy, transport and polluting industries, merge their technical powers and assets to speed up the shift to carbon neutral or negative production.

To achieve this, we do not need to rely on courageous ? but necessarily privileged ? individuals to clog up the police vans, the courts, the jails eventually. The problem with this approach is that it limits who can really afford to be involved at the centre to those who can afford to be arrested, i.e. students, academics and other middle class professionals, white people. While others can join in, they are necessarily peripheral to the core activists, the ?arrestables? as they are known.

The problem was highlighted when video-activist collective Reel News published a film of a black woman, who was passing by, being pushed to the ground by the police, who then arrested her. After clearly being stunned and frozen, XR activists did evidently come to her rescue and de-arrested the woman, but the differential hostility shown to a woman of colour, as opposed to white activists, exposes the limitations of this model of protest becoming a mass movement that draws in those in society who are most likely to suffer from climate change.

That is why socialists call for mass, collective forms of action that go right to the heart of capitalism?s destructive tendencies: strikes, occupations, mass demonstrations. The police will not be so inclined to treat such actions with kid gloves and a sense of humour.

The movement will have to decide which is more important: effective action or non-violence as a principle. Workers and oppressed people have made this decision time and again over the decades and centuries and XR is not correct to say that it is non-violence that comes out as the ?tried and tested? winning model.

Rather it is the power of the working class, the urban and rural poor, those most dangerously affected by climate change, which can swiftly change the priorities of society, from profit to purpose, from greed to need, through a socialist revolution.

This is what Red Flag and the League for the Fifth International fight for.

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