

CIVIL ACTIONS

WHEN LOBBYING FOR CHANGE GETS YOU NOWHERE, WHAT DO YOU DO? UK PROTESTERS ARE FINDING EVER BIGGER—AND SOMETIMES, MORE RISKY—WAYS TO MAKE A STATEMENT.

Words by Orlando Hughes.



COAL IS LOADED ON TO TRUCKS NEAR A MINE IN POLAND.

EPA / Andrzej Grygel / Poland Out

THE 29 HIJACKERS WORE the fluorescent orange uniforms of British railway workers, as they waited for their target—a train—to appear. It was a rare dry English morning in June, 2008. A bridge near the railway tracks provided some concealment. As the train approached, the hijackers stepped out of ambush, waving red flags in the recognized protocol to signal that it should stop.

This train wasn't carrying passengers. Its cargo was coal, to fuel the sinisterly named Drax power station: with twelve huge cooling towers, Drax has the capacity to burn 1,500 tons of coal every hour, and is the largest single source of carbon emissions in the United Kingdom.

As the train ground to a stop the hijackers tied it to the bridge and went to work. Some chained themselves to the train. Some leapt

aboard and started shoveling coal out onto the tracks—by midday, they had blocked the way with about 20 tons of the stuff. Others unfurled a large yellow banner with the words “Leave it in the ground!”

They offered the engineer a cup of tea, and settled in for the long wait.

OVER ANOTHER CUP OF tea, 26-year-old Beth Stratford described her role in the train job, and how she went from a researcher and fledgling filmmaker to activist hijacker. Taking over the coal train, she explained, was a way of “going straight for the causes of climate change rather than lobbying someone else to do it for you.”

By midnight, the police had removed the protesting hijackers and arrested them for obstruction of a railway. Their daring action will culminate in a Crown Court jury trial

this summer, where they hope to be permitted to present a defense for their not-guilty plea.

Stratford explained what they are facing matter-of-factly, with no hint of bitterness: a fine, community service or a two-year jail sentence. The last, she said, is highly unlikely: putting young climate-change protesters behind bars would be too much of a black eye for the government. A fine, she hoped, would be paid by benefactors sympathetic to the cause.

Would she do it again? Stratford paused before answering.

“Yeah, I would, but I would think more carefully about the defense in advance,” she said.

Drax was cut off from its coal supply for 24 hours by the hijacking. The power station's representatives later declared that



EPA / Made Nigi

CAPTION: A BALINESE DANCER PERFORMS IN FRONT OF THE VENUE OF THE 13TH CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE (COP13) IN BALI, INDONESIA, IN DECEMBER 2007.

its operation hadn't been interrupted, but they may have missed the point. The action was symbolic, Stratford said, and as such, entirely successful. Press reports in the wake of the event, she adds, were "surprisingly supportive."

That certainly isn't always the case: the media will often focus on the negative aspects of protests—recall the furor over anarchists attacking businesses in the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, or the disaster of recent protests in the UK that disrupted airports and prevented people from going on holiday. These kinds of actions alienate the very people who need to be won over if activists are to have any chance at starting a mass movement.

As a result, direct-action campaigners like the Drax hijackers have had to become increasingly media savvy—finding ways

to disturb and disrupt that don't make them unpopular with the public. As Stratford observed, a fight with the police results in the media talking about nothing else, doing the cause no favors whatsoever.

KYOTO WAS A BRAVE
ATTEMPT, BUT FAR TOO
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But why abandon traditional methods of lobbying politicians and signing petitions? Aren't governments well aware of the pressing need for action?

The answer is yes—but despite years of

being aware of the problems, Stratford and her cohort feel far too little has changed. And they feel drastically outgunned: a recent investigation by the Center for Public Integrity suggested that the coal industry spends close to JD32 million a year on lobbying and PR in the United States alone. It's still only politicians on the margins of government who feel at liberty to make bold statements, protesters say. Despite surging popular support for a "green revolution," the day when passing serious measures to combat climate change will win elections is not yet upon us—and society may not be able to afford to wait.

"Not to say I'm not going to respect the system we've got and the rule of law," Stratford said. "But I am going to acknowledge that it's not yielding the solutions that we need quickly enough." She pointed out that she also does more accepted kinds of activ-



EPA / Maide Ntigi



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ABOVE: AN ACTIVIST FROM OXFAM DRESSED AS POLAR BEAR SITS ON THE BACK OF A BICYCLE DURING A DEMONSTRATION AT COP13. LEFT: ACTIVISTS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ON CLIMATE JUSTICE STAGE A PROTEST NEAR THE VENUE OF COP13.

ism, like lobbying and awareness raising. “Of course I write to my MP and all that sort of conventional stuff.”

There are even some within “the system” who agree that politics as usual is failing to generate a response to serious environmental problems.

“Political change comes from leadership and popular mobilization, and you need both of them,” said Ed Milliband, the minister in charge of the newly formed Department of Energy and Climate Change, in 2008. “When you think about all the big historic movements, from the suffragettes to anti-apartheid to sexual equality in the 1960s, all the big political movements had popular mobilization. Maybe it’s an odd thing for someone in government to say, but I just think there’s a real opportunity and a need here.”

Caroline Lucas, Member of the European Parliament for the Green Party, is also noted for calling for civil disobedience. In the aftermath of the G20 summit, Lucas remarked that “peaceful protest is a civil liberty we need to be upheld, even more in the context

of the lack of government action on climate change. We have tried all the usual channels.”

STRATFORD IS RELUCTANT TO be called an “activist,” though she concedes that she may not be able to escape the title anymore. For years, she said, she has tried to be informed on issues, and taken day jobs that had some connection to the environment. A little over a year ago she had a position looking for archive footage for the film *The Age Of Stupid*, immersed in the basement of the BBC and ITN news archives.

She describes “weeks and weeks looking at footage of hurricanes hitting, deserts spreading, people getting killed, ice caps melting—over and over again.”

“It made it harder to switch off and pretend that actually everything’s fine,” she explained. It made her a radical. Not all at once, she added, but over the course of years, her work brought her to a startling realization.

“Climate change just trumps everything,”

she said. “Any progress that we make in bringing about justice and lifting people out of poverty is wiped out by climate change.”

Faced with this kind of imperative, it makes no sense to wait for governments to act.

As she describes her role in the Drax protest, Stratford made no reference to the excitement of the action, the glamor or the fame: she was entirely consumed with communicating the issues that are so important to her to the media. Raoul Djukanovic, on the other hand, is less impressed with media.

“I was drawn to activism through disillusionment with journalism,” he said. A former journalist, he’s convinced that the media are acting as a brake on the major social reorientations that today’s environmental crisis demands. “Climate change seems transcendently important,” he said. “Opposing is all very well, but can all too easily become ‘posing,’ and media won’t talk solutions unless activists do.”

Recently, Djukanovic said he found a barely 100-word story, buried deep in the back



EPA / Bogdan Borowiak

CAPTION: 'WAITING FOR RAPID ACTION, BEFORE ALL HOPES MELT DOWN,' THESE TWO-METER HIGH ICE SCULPTURES WERE SET UP OUTSIDE THE VENUE OF COP14, IN POLAND.

pages of the Financial Times, titled "Drive for growth 'will ruin planet.'" It was referring to a statement by the Sustainable Development Commission, the UK government's environmental watchdog: "The myth of [economic] growth has failed us," they said.

Extraordinary stuff—so why didn't it appear on the front page? Djukanovic said this was because newspapers "frame news with the assumptions of Western investors."

Burned out with trying to convince the media to give fair coverage to the bad news, he decided to take a creative response. He recreated the Financial Times in painstaking detail, designing an edition that was indistinguishable from the real version in all but content.

His imaginary newspaper was reporting from the year 2020 on all the good things that could have happened by then. It professed the vision of a world in which climate change was well under control, the world's financial markets operated responsibly, and more wish-list wonders were made real.

Then he printed thousands of copies, and

distributed them. There's also a website, ft2020.com. (American activists tried a similar stunt in November 2008, with The New York Times. The fake version is online at www.nytimes-se.com.)

Coming at a time when all the news seems bad, perhaps the fake FT encouraged readers

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to wonder what would happen if the media were not so much in thrall to corporate interests and the status quo. The parody was well received by the real media, including the FT itself, and praised for its professionalism. Even so, the feedback was generally dry and literal, and carefully avoided engaging with the spoof paper's content or the real issue.

"If they re-framed their thinking, they could help build a different world instead of conning us with lifestyle porn and bubbles," Djukanovic says.

Whether they're disturbing the daily news, cutting off the coal supply, or going even farther, protesters say the key to their movement is helping people to come to the realization that climate change must be taken seriously. If they can find out for themselves, perhaps with some gentle prodding, then they will feel a sense of ownership of the process, and will be more likely to bring their acquaintances along for the ride.

The real challenge, they say, comes when the recently converted ask what they should do.

If coming to understand the issues is the starter, finding the right set of solutions is the main course. And maybe that's the point: protesters who are willing to risk arrest to stop a coal train are the ones who have really understood how much more it will take than turning off light bulbs to arrest the damage mankind is doing to the planet. ■



EPA / Andy Rian

THOUSANDS OF CLIMATE CHANGE PROTESTERS MARCH THROUGH CENTRAL LONDON, BRITAIN, TOWARD THE US EMBASSY, IN DECEMBER 2007. MASS DEMONSTRATIONS TOOK PLACE IN 50 CITIES AROUND THE GLOBE, TO COINCIDE WITH UN CLIMATE CHANGE TALKS IN BALI.

PROTEST DIARY: LONDON'S CLIMATE CAMP

ON MAY 1, 2009, several hundred protesters gathered outside the European Climate Exchange in London's financial district. This is the leading marketplace for carbon dioxide emissions trading, and it was the chosen spot for what was meant to be a 24-hour peaceful protest, complete with workshops, placards, tents, food and composting toilets.

The mood on the day was calm, rather like a subdued carnival, with picnics on patches of turf laid down in the street and dancing to live music or a bicycle-powered sound system. Inventive slogans adorned banners and boards. The usual crowd of climate change activists were there, albeit from a disappointingly narrow social band. But of course this doesn't mean that they didn't have a point. Unfortunately it was less clear what outcome was possible.

As an awareness raising exercise, there

was the opportunity for positive media coverage. Although the Climate Camp, a separate part of a much larger day of G20 protests, received the most encouraging coverage, reporting on the day as a whole was dominated by the discussion of heavy-handed policing.

But then, in the run-up to the event, all manner of unlikely trouble was predicted by police and certain G20 protesters—to some extent becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The death of bystander Ian Tomlinson, although not in the Climate Camp section, dominated much of the aftermath. Henry Porter wrote in *The Guardian* about a government that "seethes with the authoritarian desire to stamp out an impertinent challenge to its record of inactivity." Elsewhere, testimonials abounded of people being beaten in unprovoked ways, including card-

carrying members of the media.

It's unfortunate that this kind of protest so often ends up by being defined by the relationship between the protesters and the police; the more extreme the interventions of the police are, the more volatile the crowd becomes. This is no accident, and has long been a standard tactic of police forces in the employ of regimes that do not like to be criticized.

The sun went down on the Climate Camp after only 12 hours, as riot police forcibly removed more determined elements. It was down to good fortune rather than good judgment that more people were not seriously hurt. So while the camp reiterated an important—if old—lesson to would-be protesters, it seemed more like an own-goal on the part of a government that goes to great lengths to extol their leadership on measures to tackle climate change.