

38 | The environmental crisis and the new environmental revolt

John Molyneux

There have, of course, been many environmental demonstrations and mobilisations in the past, but there are now signs that we may just be at the beginning of the kind of global mass movement necessary to respond to the urgent threat of climate change,¹ species extinction and the numerous other ecological disasters facing us in the Anthropocene.²

It is clear that the publication of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report in October 2018 was a major turning point. The report's warning that the world had 12 years in which to act had a huge impact on public consciousness. This does not mean that we have only 12 years before the end of the world or we are all dead. Rather, it means that, if we continue with business as usual, we will see the onset of catastrophic climate change and that we have only 12 years to turn this situation round and avert unprecedented disaster. However, this salutary warning has had the effect – quite rightly – of alarming people and galvanising them to take action in a new and unprecedented way.

The IPCC report has been reinforced by a number of very visible extreme weather events – the California fires, the exceptional temperatures in Australia (up around 50 degrees Celsius) and the terrible cyclones in Mozambique, Malawi etc. These disasters in rapid succession have started to bring into the public consciousness the real meaning of climate change: not a single cataclysm that may or may not happen in 50 or 100 years and not just, or even primarily, about rising sea levels by 2100, but about a steady escalation of devastating extreme weather and its consequences – droughts, fires, storms, floods – which has begun already and which will intensify in the immediate future.

For those of us who have engaged with the climate change issue for some time or have been following environmental literature, even slightly, none of this is scientifically new, but there is no doubt that it has made climate change a 'reality' in the minds of millions of people – especially millions of young people – in a way that has never been true before. Where young people are concerned, it is also clear that the ground has been prepared by a serious amount of educational work by teachers. Another effect of these developments has been to shift the tone and balance of media reporting. There has been a move away from the formula that 'balance' required treating climate change as merely a hypothesis always to be offset by a climate change denier and never making any connection between extreme weather events and climate change. Increasingly, the media has been obliged to treat climate change as a scientifically established fact. Symptomatic of this shift was the appearance of the David Attenborough TV 'blockbuster' *Climate Change: The Facts*, which in itself has had a major amplifying effect.

At the same time, people are also becoming increasingly aware that the environmental crisis is not limited to climate change. The devastating impact of single-use plastic on life in our oceans was also dramatically highlighted by David Attenborough in *Blue Planet II*, and the major health risks, particularly to children, caused by air pollution have been stressed by World Health Organization reports.³ Then, most recently, on 6 May came the UN report that human activity was threatening the extinction of a million species.⁴ Again, there was nothing really new here,⁵ but, again, it has contributed to an explosion in public awareness.

This, then, is the context in which we have seen the new wave of environmental activism and resistance emerge. Central to this wave have been two movements: the international school strikes and Extinction Rebellion (XR). There are in fact a multitude of environmental organisations and campaigns, ranging from the household names such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth (which have been around for a very long time and certainly have large-scale support but which are not very interested in mass mobilisation or action), to smaller, more radical campaigns such as Not Here, Not Anywhere, would-be umbrella groups like Stop Climate Chaos and niche projects like People For Bees. But the school strikes and XR are by far the most exciting developments.

The School Strikes for Climate, also known in some places as Fridays for Future, have been magnificent. Their origin can be traced back to 2015 when there was a school strike involving about 50,000 internationally on, the first day of COP21, the UN Climate Conference in Paris. But the current wave was begun by the then-15-year-old, Greta Thunberg, in Sweden in August 2018. Initially acting alone, Thunberg decided not to attend school from 20 August until the Swedish General Election on 9 September. Thereafter, she announced her intention to strike every Friday and coined the slogan *Fridays for Future*. From this small beginning, the strikes have mushroomed globally. By 20 November, there were 15,000 school strikers in Australia. In Switzerland, there were 4,000 on 21 December, rising to 65,000 on 2 February 2019. In Belgium, 3,000 on 10 January rose to 12,750 on 17 January. In Germany, 10,000 on 20 January grew to 26,000 on 15 February. In Ireland, things began with 200 strikers on 22 February.

On 15 March, the strike exploded internationally. Here are some of the high points: Australia – 150,000; Germany – 300,000; France – 195,000; Italy – 200,000; Canada – 150,000; UK – 50,000; Austria – 30,000; Luxemburg – 15,000; Ireland – 16,000.

There were also smaller strikes and protests in places as far flung as Reykjavik, Slovenia, Cape Town, Hong Kong and Bangkok. Overall, about 2,200 events took place in about 125 different countries, with more than a million participating worldwide. It is clear this extraordinary movement of school students has

the ability and potential to unite young people across national boundaries and various sectarian political divides in a way that is unprecedented and truly inspiring.

The movement has also thrown up its own iconic heroine, the 16-year-old Greta Thunberg. When the world's elites assembling at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January invited her to address them, it is probable that they thought this would be a clever move and they would be able to turn her head and co-opt her. After all, they turned the head of Nelson Mandela in 1992.⁶ If so, they miscalculated, and she responded with a defiant call to arms that echoed round the world.

We are facing a disaster of unspoken sufferings for enormous amounts of people and now is not the time for speaking politely or focusing on what we can or cannot say. Now is the time to speak clearly. Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that homo sapiens has ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop the emissions of greenhouse gases...

We are now at a time in history where everyone with any insight into the climate crisis that threatens our civilization and the entire biosphere must speak out in clear language, no matter how uncomfortable and unprofitable that may be. We must change almost everything in our current societies...

Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want your hope, I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act, I want you to act as if you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is.⁷

And this is continuing. Thunberg's response to Ireland's declaration of a climate emergency was spot on: *'Great news from Ireland!! Who is next? And remember #ClimateEmergency means leaving fossil fuels in the ground*

Two other features of the school strike phenomenon are worth mentioning. The first is that while, like any other newly emergent mass movement, it is politically diverse in terms of the consciousness of its participants and there is, inevitably, a strand of anti-political party sentiment within it, it nevertheless has a brilliant vibrant

radicalism. The 10–15,000 who marched on the Dáil on 15 March were chanting the basic ‘What do we want? – action NOW!’ but also the more radical and thought out ‘System Change not Climate Change’ and the crucial ‘Keep it in the Ground’. As Greta Thunberg understands, the latter is a vital demand in a situation where the first resort of the political classes everywhere, but especially in Ireland, will be to turn to massive greenwashing spin and grand statements of intent without doing anything substantial. ‘Keep it in the Ground’ actually insists on an action which is concrete and legally enforceable and targets the real climate change offenders, not ordinary people (as with the government’s cynical Carbon Tax).⁸

Second, while a school students’ strike does not have the economic power to hit profits like a mass workers’ strike, and while it may be (hopefully not) relatively short-lived as the school student population turns over, it has massive ideological resonance and is a fantastic pledge for the future. Participants in these strikes will remember what they have done next year and the year after and in the years to come as they are increasingly proven right by events. Clearly, it is important that the young people involved grasp that the issue of climate change is primarily one of the 1% versus the rest of humanity, not a generational question, which is how the media will try to spin it in order to let the rich and powerful off the hook, but there is every prospect that will happen now they are so powerfully engaged.

The other major recent development, Extinction Rebellion (XR), was established in Britain in May 2018, with about one hundred academics signing a call to action in October 2018, which was launched by Roger Hallam, Gail Bradbook and others. The core founders of XR derive from Compassionate Revolution: Rising Up, a group which in turn came out of Occupy. From a Marxist standpoint, it would be easy to critique this group’s ideas, which include the naive notion that the 1% can be dealt with ‘by treating them like spoiled children’ and ‘lovingly resetting their boundaries’,⁹ but to take this as a starting point would be to miss the point. What matters most is not what they have said but what they have done. What XR have done is truly spectacular.

On 17 November last year, in what was called ‘Rebellion Day’, about 6,000 people took part in a coordinated action to block the five main bridges over the River Thames in London (Southwark, Blackfriars,

Waterloo, Westminster and Lambeth) for several hours, causing major traffic disruption. Then, following a series of small-scale guerrilla actions to keep the momentum going, including short road blockages¹⁰ and a naked demonstration in the House of Commons, they launched their even more spectacular mid-April occupations.

On Monday 15 April, XR occupied four key sites in Central London – Oxford Circus, Marble Arch, Parliament Square and Waterloo Bridge – and, crucially, managed to hold them. At Oxford Circus, they installed a pink boat, and some of the activists glued themselves to it. At Waterloo Bridge, they set up several gazebos, potted plants and trees and a skate ramp. Five activists were charged with criminal damage for targeting the Shell headquarters on the Thames embankment. The police responded by imposing a 24-hour Section 14 condition requiring activists to move to Marble Arch and began arresting people on Waterloo Bridge (probably the single most disruptive blockade). But arresting 113 people failed to break the occupation as arrestees were replaced by new occupiers. On the second day of actions on Waterloo Bridge, police began making arrests of the activists at 12.40 pm, but stopped a few hours later, after, they said, running out of holding cells. On Wednesday, a large force of police marched on the camp at Parliament Square, arresting people and partially removing roadblocks before it was retaken later the same night by protesters who arrived with a samba band and re-established the roadblocks. On Thursday, four activists who climbed on top of a train on the Docklands Light Railway were remanded in custody, without bail, for four weeks.

Amazingly, the XR activists were able to maintain their occupations, at least to some degree, for 10 days. Not until 25 April, after over 1,100 arrests, did XR call the action off at a ‘closing ceremony’ in Hyde Park. It was the largest, most sustained, street civil disobedience¹¹ in Britain in living memory. Not surprisingly, it has been inspirational internationally, and Extinction Rebellion groups have been founded in a number of countries, including, of course, Ireland.

XR Ireland has not yet reached the heights of XR in London, but it has already organised some very positive events, including the 19 April occupation of O’Connell Bridge for several hours and several-hundred-strong

Snap Rally at the Dáil on 16 May in response to the Government's PR-driven declaration of a climate emergency. One of the most striking things about XR is that it is clearly growing and reaching new people. Dublin XR has held several well attended and very enthusiastic meetings,¹² with many people – mostly young but also across the age range – who are taking part in their first political campaign. Most of the 'traditional' left are so far nowhere to be seen.

This is clearly a movement with great potential. Its three basic demands are:

1. Government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change;

2. Government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025;

3. Government must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice.

These demands are ones everyone who grasps the ecological crisis can support and unite around, while also being far-reaching. The call to 'tell the truth' is important since both politicians and media have been claiming to acknowledge the problem while also systematically playing down the real scale and urgency of the emergency. The target of 2025 for net zero carbon emissions is radical, necessary and far more appropriate than hopelessly inadequate promises for action by 2050 which the Irish and other governments waffle on about. The demand for 'climate and ecological justice', if followed through, is very radical indeed in the sense that it will hopefully preclude unjust (non-)solutions like carbon tax and clearly cannot be achieved without fundamental social change.

One difficulty for XR in the future may be that it is based on a very mechanical theory of social change. Its founders believe – and this is repeated at meetings as a kind of basic principle – that their research has shown that for a movement to win it has to mobilise 3.5% of the population to engage in non-violent civil disobedience in the capital city for a number of days continuously and then the government will capitulate to its demands. Unfortunately, this is far too simplistic. There is no magic number for success, and struggles can go on for years with advances and retreats. Governments and, even more so, ruling classes don't just surrender, they

manoeuvre. They fake, pretend to make concessions, then return to the offensive and so on. And often they resort to repression. XR doesn't so far seem to have considered these possibilities.

The tactics pursued in London in mid-April were brilliantly successful up to a point, but they were also predicated on the police behaving at least in a moderately civilised fashion. Yes, the police arrested over 1,000 people, but relatively gently. Anyone who has seen the French police in action against the Yellow Vests, or numerous other police forces including, indeed, the Metropolitan police in the past, especially when dealing with black people, must know this is not guaranteed to continue. And let's be clear – the cops have more than enough resources at their disposal to disperse by force (with horses, batons, plastic bullets, tasers etc.) even many thousands of non-violent protestors if the political decision to do so is made at the top.

These points are not academic because winning the battle over fossil fuels involves defeating immensely powerful vested interests, interests central to the global capitalist system. Moreover, it is a battle that will have to be won internationally, which involves the capacity to deal not just with A Garda Síochána and even the Met but with the murderous US cops and the utterly ruthless Chinese state, for example. The truth, therefore, is that the more successful it is in achieving the mass mobilisations it so rightly aims for, the more XR will have to confront some of the problems and limitations of its 'formula' for social change.

However, these limitations do not change the fact that both the school students and XR and, doubtless, other movements yet to come, are a breath of fresh air that should be warmly welcomed and constructively engaged with by socialists.

Notes

- 1 I had just written this opening sentence when I saw this statement in Jacobin: 'We may be witnessing the first stirrings of a climate movement that's big enough to tackle the coming disaster — and radical enough to name the system responsible for it'. Liza Featherstone, 'The Scale of the Problem', Jacobin, 8 May 2019, https://jacobinmag.com/2019/05/climate-change-student-strikes-green-new-deal?fbclid=IwARoXbhU_GMpKbP64_nKx_mWq19arrkDyBhuSqlcRhk-AeVvTKZ100j74-ow.
 - 2 For the meaning of the Anthropocene, see Dave O'Farrell, 'The meaning of the Anthropocene', *Irish Marxist Review* 21 and Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, New York, 2016.
 'Ambient air pollution accounts for an estimated 4.2 million deaths per year due to stroke, heart disease, lung cancer and chronic respiratory diseases. Around 91% of the world's population lives in places where air quality levels exceed WHO limits. Ambient air pollution - a major threat to health and climate, [HTTPS://www.who.int/airpollution/ambient/en/](https://www.who.int/airpollution/ambient/en/)
 - 3 See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>.
 - 4 See Linda Kehoe, 'The great species extinction', *Irish Marxist Review* 21 and Ian Rappel, 'Capitalism and species extinction', *International Socialism* 117.
 - 5 'As for Mandela, it has long been understood that it was his trip to Davos in 1992 ... that changed his mind about the ANC's economic principles. Meeting the world's business and political elite, he reported, dissuaded him from pursuing radical economic policies. Ronnie Kasrils, *A Simple Man*, Jacana, South Africa, 2017, p.237. Ronnie Kasrils was a Minister in the Mandela government.
 - 6 Greta Thunberg's Speech at Davos: https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/greta-speeches#greta_speech_jan25_2019.
 - 7 See John Molyneux, 'Carbon Tax – a Cynical Manoeuvre', <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2019/04/02/carbon-tax-a-cynical-manoeuvre/>.
 - 8 See the Compassionate Revolution website: <https://www.compassionate-revolution.net/why-compassionate-revolution.html>.
 - 9 From 21 November 2018, beginning a campaign known as 'swarming' roadblocks (repeated roadblocks of approximately seven minutes each), small groups of Extinction Rebellion activists carried out protests by occupying road junctions at Lambeth and Vauxhall Bridges, Elephant and Castle, Tower Bridge and Earl's Court, causing serious disruption to rush-hour traffic and continuing throughout the day. Similar actions continued for the next two days in London, with one group moving to Oxford Street on the afternoon of the discount shopping day Black Friday. On 23 November, in a first action outside London, an Extinction Rebellion group in York stopped traffic on Coppergate, Clifford Street, Pavement and Ouse Bridge, as well as holding a demo outside West Offices of the City of York Council.. An Oxford XR group blocked traffic on Botley Road on the same day.
 - 10 As opposed to, say, the 'civil disobedience' of refusing to pay the Poll Tax.
 - 11 Bristol XR, I am told by a comrade there, is currently having weekly meetings of 200–250.
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