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Britain: Extinction Rebellion have put climate back in the headlines. What should the next steps be for addressing the climate emergency?

Sunday 28 April 2019, by [GUERRERO Dorothy Grace](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2019).

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A boat named after Honduran environmental activist, Berta Cáceres who was murdered in 2016, blocked Oxford Circus, London.

Extinction Rebellion's sustained and inspiring civil disobedience actions that lasted for almost two weeks have put climate change issues front and centre where they belong. Their important message of the urgency needed to save human society in its current state did not just echo the ideals of previous mobilisations on climate, but also touched broadly on the huge unaddressed issue of the climate-frying way that governments choose to run the economy. More importantly their audacity became household conversations during this year's Easter or Seder celebrations.

The fact that climate change concerns have mobilised a lot of people who have never joined any mass actions before is a big boost to the global climate justice movement. The thousands that mobilised and joined the Extinction Rebellion, as well as the school children that have been on strike in more than 50 countries across the world, deserve massive thanks and support.

It is not surprising that those who participated and those who supported the actions from their homes have different takes or even disagree on some of the tactics used by the systematically polite campaign of disruption that transformed five of the busiest locations in London (Parliament Square, Marble Arch, Oxford Circus, Piccadilly Circus, and Waterloo) into a public political education theatre. However, there is agreement on Extinction Rebellion's message that the current economic system is incompatible with sustainability. That is important.

The huge challenges currently facing our survival

In her interviews, Greta Thunberg [1], the 16-year old student who popularised the school strike for climate change action that spread globally said that “Extinction Rebellion is one of the most important and hopeful movements of our time. Civil disobedience is necessary to create attention to the ongoing climate and ecological crisis.” She repeated her challenge for action in her speech addressing British MPs in parliament. It is very positive that young people in this country are getting politicised and getting their more radical political training at this crucial historical juncture of imminent climate catastrophe, Brexit and growing inequality in the UK.

As James Anderson, the Harvard professor best known for his work linking chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) to the Ozone Hole, warned, 75 to 80 percent of permanent ice in the Arctic have already melted in the last 35 years [2]. His study influenced the 1987 UN Montreal Protocol that phased out the production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances (ODS).

According to Anderson, the melting of ice is causing, what scientists call, feedbacks. In other words, ways that the earth is responding to warming like the release of methane trapped in permafrost and under the sea, which will exacerbate warming. Another feedback, the pending collapse of the Greenland ice sheet, will raise sea level by 7 metres. Imagine how much of the UK will be left above water in such conditions. Anderson’s calculation shows that no permanent ice will be left in the Arctic after 2022 if the ‘business as usual’ attitude continues. Understanding and accepting climate science induces concern. But, understanding and accepting the reality of capitalism’s incompatibility with planetary sustainability demands appropriate actions.

Gaps and next steps to move forward with Extinction Rebellion UK

It is refreshing to read and hear that many participants in Extinction Rebellion are reflecting on the limits of its current tactics and are posing important questions about the tactics and messaging used. It is also important that key people are mindful of these reflections and feedback and consider how to improve the repertoire of actions and demands in future mobilisations. This includes the need to add to Extinction Rebellion’s three demands, which are currently: for politicians to tell the truth, for the UK to cut carbon emissions to zero by 2025, and for the formation of a citizens’ assembly.

The most important demand to add addresses the very limited mention in the panels and speeches on the need to change the system and see the responsibility of British multinationals for climate change. Many British corporations, especially those in the extractives sector, owe great climate debts to the people, not just in the UK, but more gravely to those in the global South [3]. Their operations with impunity have violated human rights and degraded the environment and ecology in poor countries.

Extinction Rebellion US have already added a fourth demand [4] - a just transition that prioritises the most vulnerable people and indigenous sovereignty; establishes reparations and remediation led by and for Black people, Indigenous people, people of colour and poor communities for years of environmental injustice, establishes legal rights for ecosystems to thrive and regenerate in perpetuity, and repairs the effects of ongoing ecocide to prevent extinction of human and all species, in order to maintain a liveable, just planet for all.

The people and movements of the global south deserve more than mentions in speeches. Most importantly, the global south is also here in the UK, they are here toiling as migrant workers or refugees who are fleeing from the consequences of war and policies that rob them of opportunities

for a good life back home. There should be more black and brown bodies in such mass actions. A 'strategy of arrests', although useful, will continue to alienate communities of colour from participating because of the history of people of colour dying in police custody as well as the continuing hostile environment against migrants. There is need to emphasise multiple and broader ways to get involved.

Many observers and participants confirm that the long-standing critique of the British environmental movement as too white and middle class remains. This is not to blame white and middle class activists who are using their privilege to protest the government's lack of actions that correspond to the intensity of the challenge. Rather it serves as a reminder that there is still a need to be more inclusive and to recognise that communities across the global south have been fighting for climate justice for many decades and are dying because of climate impacts and because of their environmental activism.

On a positive note, Peoples Assemblies, which bring together people's ideas as Extinction Rebellion moves forward, should be realised as a way of addressing and expanding on concerns raised. The discussions on corporations and climate change, the revolving door between big corporations and Whitehall, and how to take on corporate polluters should increase further. Altogether, what the week of rebellion achieved is still inspiring, positive and progressive. Everyone on the Left should continue to contribute to it. May it be a vehicle for unity and future strength.

Dorothy Grace Guerrero, 26 April 2019

P.S.

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<https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2019/apr/26/extinction-rebellion-have-put-climate-back-headlines-what-should-next-steps-be>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/19/extinction-rebellion-reports-hundreds-of-people-signing-up>

[2] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcmahon/2018/01/15/carbon-pollution-has-shoved-the-climate-backward-at-least-12-million-years-harvard-scientist-says/?fbclid=IwAR05jH42W0ncQuUyLIYRpdMxJbfF9RQ5HqM1TtxmA4KxtmTd3no4-RYh7Gs#36630fc0963e>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change>

[4] <https://extinctionrebellion.us>