

Table of Contents

Climate Camp and Class 1

Climate Camp and Class

By Adam Ford

Picture the scene. The setting sun is glinting off the visors of the police lined up in front of me. It's the second or third day of the weeklong Camp for Climate Action - already I've lost count - and for the second or third time since I last slept it looks as if the cops are about to invade. I've just bolted from the opposite end of the site, where I've helped dig a defensive trench at another gate. To my left, atop a red van, a woman who sounds scouser than scouse exhaustedly screeches words of encouragement into a megaphone and somehow dances to Radiohead. To my right, a posher than posh couple casually talk up Cornish nationalism and agree that political correctness means white people suffer more oppression than anyone else on the planet. All the campers care about the environment, but that seems to be the only thing we have in common. That and - by now - a dislike of police.

The first Climate Camp was set up in 2006, by activists who had been heavily involved in organising protests against the G8 summit in Gleneagles the year before. Their immediate target was the Drax coal-fired power station in North Yorkshire, but they sought to demonstrate two things. Firstly, that direct action was an effective way of making changes within society - like shutting down power stations - and secondly, that people could live non-hierarchically, in an environmentally sustainable way. Many of the initial organisers self-identified as anarchists, and they wanted climate camps to be anarchy in action.

At least that was the theory. Now in Climate Camp's third year, the results are highly questionable. In terms of building a movement for environmental sustainability, the camp experience and how it is perceived by the wider population both need to be considered.

Certainly, to be a climate camper is to participate in anarchy in its original and best sense - running things without bosses. The camp is clustered into regional neighbourhoods, which hold meetings every morning. These assemblies discuss organisation within the neighbourhoods and camp policy as a whole, such as whether to accept the police's latest ultimatum. Decisions are eventually reached via consensus, and 'spokes' are delegated to express the collective's views to the 'spokes council', before reporting back. This can seem like a long-winded process if you're used to taking orders, but it works to ensure that everyone feels ownership over decisions, and are therefore usually happy to implement them.

Anarchy can work fast too, and not just when riot police arrive on site at 5.30 in the morning. Perhaps my favourite illustration of this took place on the final Sunday evening, when a trail of wooden boards that snaked through the camp needed to be stacked. Someone took the initiative to do this, then someone else joined in next to them. Within a couple of minutes, the idea of stacking had gone along the trail, and about quarter of an hour later it was all done. Quite a strenuous task had quickly been completed, without a single order being given.

However, halfway through the week 'An open letter to the neighbourhoods' was circulated, authored by 'a large group of anti-authoritarian participants in the climate camp', and expressing 'deep concern about the direction that the debates have taken over the past days'. It went on to claim that 'In more than one workshop we have heard calls from the podium for command-and-control and market-orientated measures to address climate change', and 'The responses to these proposals have been far too polite'. Calling for 'A very clear rejection of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism', as well as 'all forms and systems of domination and discrimination', it emphasised 'A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact in such biased and undemocratic organisations'.

The letter hit on one of the central problems facing the camp: how to make it a welcoming and non-sectarian space for people new to anarchist ideas, whilst ensuring that career environmentalists like George Monbiot and Mark Lynas (who outraged many by backing the government's nuclear power plans, the former on BBC's Newsnight) don't get an easy ride. This issue is compounded by the inevitable tendency of more militant campaigners being drawn to the barricades and defending camp against police.

Saturday was the climax of the week, and had been declared the day when we would "go beyond talk and culminate in a spectacular mass action to shut down Kingsnorth. Permanently!". The camp separated into blue, green, silver and orange blocs, with the plan being that we would take different routes over land, sea and air to get to Kingsnorth, arriving en masse, and E.ON bosses would order a shutdown. The end result was that one person climbed over the second security fence onto company property, and was immediately arrested. One boat made it onto a jetty, and a police charge sheet reveals that one of the four water inlet systems was shut down, but E.ON claimed it was "business as usual". Fifty arrests were made, about half the total for the week.

So much for what actually happened. How much of the intended message survived the mainstream media's filters and made it into public consciousness?

At the start of the week, coverage focused on the police attacks. Monday, 4th August saw BBC exposure of the police's brutal dawn raid, giving details of casualties, showing police in riot gear attacking campers, and quoting camp media team members at length. On Tuesday, they ran with local Labour MP Bob Marshall-Andrews's claim that the police had been "provocative and heavy-handed". On the other hand, none of the other almost daily attacks got any press. This may be partly due to the pressure of the police's announcement that they'd discovered a stash of knives and other weapons in woodland near the site. Campers immediately denied any connection with the stash, and none has since been found. But it seems likely that for many, this discovery provided retrospective cover for the police's use of force, potentially dissuading waverers from paying a visit.

For the mainstream media, the camp wasn't so much an experiment in sustainable living as a collection of oddities. When they discussed on-site conditions at all, they seemed more intrigued that there were people in the 21st century who voluntarily used compost toilets and grey water systems, than by the green implications. That this was part of an 'eco village' seems largely to have passed them by, a fact illustrated by a Google News search. Bizarrely, the Custer County Chief in Nebraska, USA picked up on it, as did a New Statesman article (not very encouragingly titled 'Woolly minded hippies?'). This contrasts with 109 results for "climate camp" "compost toilet". For their part, The Guardian even produced a tourist-style survival guide, entitled 'How to go to Climate Camp - and enjoy it'.

As in previous years, the camp got the mainstream media talking about the role that carbon emissions play in manmade climate change. However, outlets overwhelmingly portrayed this as a protest against emissions at Kingsnorth in isolation, rather than the structural need of capital to expand, degrading the environment in the process. One deviation from this was when the Kent News quoted camper Anya Patterson as saying "If we are serious about fighting climate change, we have to tackle the root causes, and those are greed and a commitment to relentless economic growth." Similarly, the non-hierarchical decision-making process was largely ignored, with the BBC merely describing it as 'exhaustive' and 'somewhat baffling'.

One facet of the week that all mainstream media went big on was the idea of direct action. Unfortunately, it was only covered in the most superficial way, focusing on the supposed dangers that campers would be letting themselves in for. Of course, police attack was not listed amongst these

hazards, but electrocution and drowning were. The implicit message in all of this was that once people stepped outside the law, their safety was at risk, and that therefore the state and - by extension - police really are there to serve and protect everyone - batons, riding crops, pepper spray and all.

Though the Climate Camp website is declaring the week a resounding success, it can surely be judged a valiant failure in terms of its stated objectives. E.ON were inconvenienced for a few hours, but Kingsnorth was not shut down. Some campers learned about non-hierarchical organising and strategies for sustainable living, but this made little impact on the wider public. 'Direct action' became a media buzzword, but only as something irresponsible and to be feared. Carbon emissions became a hot topic, but in the context of the above, only as 'footprints' to feel guilty about.

Indeed, some campers were hoping for this. On the Thursday morning, I had a discussion with an activist about his ambitions for what is being dubbed the 'climate movement'. "To make a lot of people very guilty", he replied.

This emphasis on guilt as a precursor for individualistic lifestyle change is perhaps the very opposite of what many original organisers hoped for. However, I believe it is fundamental to what is sometimes called 'green and black' anarchism. The idea of a class-based transformation of society is rejected - in some cases because of righteous disillusionment with traditional forms of class struggle, in many cases because the individual is from a relatively wealthy background. When such people see impending environmental catastrophe as the number one threat to their lives, their philosophy often becomes more anti-technological than anti-capitalist. Taking this perspective to its logical conclusion, capitalism and the state wouldn't be much of a problem if they could somehow leave people alone in ecological peace, but since they can't, both must be overcome. However, with international class-based solidarity apparently ruled out, the result is that 'setting an example' (as one woman put it) becomes the main method of ideological recruitment.

This sets green and black anarchism up for its own failure. Due to the built-in ideological structures of mainstream media and the state, the example set is of using those compost toilets, getting attacked by police, and putting yourself in mortal danger on your week off. Understandably, this is not an example that many are willing to follow.

The boast that Climate Camp would 'shut down Kingsnorth' was always about bravado and bluster, a tendency which people from all strands of activism are vulnerable to in times of unrelenting defeat. But how could Kingsnorth really be shut down?

Medway Council have approved E.ON's plans, and the final decision rests with the government, who have already indicated they will grant permission. Demolition of the current site and the construction of the new one is scheduled for February next year. On camp, there was a lot of talk about trying to build on current 'momentum' and systematically blockading work from then onwards. Clearly, because of the long term commitment to direct action necessary, this would attract a smaller and ever dwindling number of people, unless substantial local support is forthcoming. Even if it is, there are plans for seven more coal-fired stations in the pipeline, plus all the other myriad ways capital is destroying the environment. There simply aren't enough of us to wage such a struggle.

Any campaign against environmental destruction has to be rooted in a movement against the profit motive and the capitalist system, or it is doomed to symbolic gestures and failure. Industry doesn't create carbon emissions, working people do, because they are paid to do so and see no viable alternative. While capitalist ideas prevail amongst the working class, invasions of power stations are less direct action and more dramatic lobbying; ultimately impotent appeals to the government to see further than the bottom line, something it is organically incapable of doing.

Ironically, this plays into the hands of people like George Monbiot. 'Climate change is not anarchy's football', he patronisingly declared in a post-camp online reply to an article by radical journalist Ewa Jasiewicz, before going on to declare that 'I don't know how to solve the problem of capitalism without resorting to totalitarianism'. And every dictatorship needs paid advisors.

No George, climate change is not 'anarchy's football'; it's a matter of life and death. That's why we need working class revolution, so we can sort it out.