

# **The Climate Justice Movement in the Czech Republic Has Broken the Silence. Now What?**

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The 'climate spring' arrived in the Czech Republic this year as young students, spurred on by the global school strike movement, abandoned their classrooms to protest the Czech government's chronic inaction on climate. Josef Patočka situates this new wave of activism in a tradition of ecological mobilisation in the country known for being in the 'coal heartlands of Europe'. Now that the climate issue has broken into Czech public debate, what can be done to effectively push for structural change and a just transition to clean energy?

With over half of its electricity still generated from coal, an energy sector ruled by a powerful oligopoly of wealthy corporations, and a lively public debate on climate all but non-existent compared to Western Europe, it seemed unlikely, until recently, that the Czech Republic would be the scene of any remarkable developments in terms of climate and energy policy.

But this seems to be changing. Since early 2019, the Czech Republic has witnessed a remarkable surge in climate activism, unparalleled in the past decades of passivity and denial. How has this come about? What are the chances for the nascent climate movement to change the political course of the country? To a great extent, this development was triggered by one largely unforeseen event in spring 2019.

## **Students breaking through**

On 17 March, Richard Brabec, Minister of the Environment and prominent Deputy Prime Minister in the scandal-ridden government of the populist oligarch Andrej Babiš, entered the Sunday national television political debate to talk climate with his habitual smile. But this time, his usual performance betrayed a certain tone of uneasiness.

This was due to the fact that two days earlier, in unison with young people across the globe, thousands of school children in the Czech Republic skipped class to march through Prague, Brno and other cities big and small. They lambasted universal political inaction on the root causes of the climate crisis and demanded change from the country's political leadership.

Brabec's defense of his cabinet's record was typically both patronising and hypocritical. He stated he was "happy" about the protest and the concern it has demonstrated, then shortly after he accused the "youngsters" of being "unfair" to the government, which –he claimed– was already doing all in its power to protect the climate.

## **Coal commission as a concession**

However, during this first major political reaction to the initial student strike, Brabec announced –reluctantly– a government concession to the emerging pressure. He promised to set up a coal commission, following the German

example, which would discuss possibilities for an earlier phaseout of the climate-wrecking fossil fuel which is responsible for the larger part of the country's emissions.

This underscores the importance the spring climate strikes have had in allowing the emerging climate justice movement in the Czech Republic to accomplish the first task of any social movement: they broke the silence, exposed the problem, and established the subject as a legitimate point of public debate.

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As important as the youth climate strikes have been in bringing about this breakthrough (no small feat in a society plagued until recently by the legacy of the former president and internationally renowned climate denier Václav Klaus), they are the latest development in a long history of ecological activism in the Czech Republic. For as much as the new prominence of the climate crisis in the Czech public debate is indebted to the current international momentum ('the Greta effect'), it is also the product of a distinct domestic tradition of struggles for ecological justice, particularly against coal.

## **Coal country**

The simple truth is that the struggle for climate justice will be in any foreseeable future in the Czech Republic prominently directed against the coal industry. Together with Germany and Poland, the Czech Republic remains one of the vertices of what has been dubbed the 'black triangle', or the 'coal heartlands of Europe'. These three countries account for the absolute majority of all the coal production and coal power generation in the whole of the European Union.

Owing to the wasteful usage of this most-polluting of fossil fuels, the Czech CO<sub>2</sub> emissions rank among the highest in the EU in both per-capita and per-unit-of-GDP terms. Moreover, emissions from the energy sector have barely abated at all in the past two decades, betraying the non-existence of any meaningful climate policy.

The fact that Brussels-set mitigation targets (such as that for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) are measured against the 1990 baseline provided a simple excuse for the governments of the former Soviet-bloc states, including the Czech government. Emissions have indeed declined compared to 1990 levels, but not because of an ambitious – or any, for that matter – policy but simply as the result of the collapse of many industries during the transition to capitalism in the early 1990s. Since then, they have been really stagnating.

## **A powerful industry**

This stagnation has been both the result and the precondition for the coal business to flourish. This concerns not only ČEZ, the semi-state monopolistic energy provider, which has used its money and power to expand even beyond the borders of the country, buying utilities and power plants in Bulgaria, Romania and Albania. Crucially, the Czech Coal company, responsible for mining lignite in the huge open-cast pits of Northern Bohemia, was plundered from the state during the post-communist transition years of the 1990s and then sold into the hands of two billionaires – Pavel Tykač and Jan Dienstl – who have gradually re-purposed it into the Northern Energy Company, a prominent and aggressive anti-mitigation player in the Czech energy sector.

More recently these have been joined by Daniel Křetínský's powerful EPH corporation, which is now expanding

with acquisitions all over Europe, including the purchase of the east-German coal assets previously owned by the Swedish energy company Vattenfall [for more on Vattenfall see [here](#)]. This expansion has seen the EPH corporation assume the position of the third most-polluting European coal company. Even if Křetínský does not own so many assets within the Czech Republic itself, he has a crucial influence over the country's media and owns one of its largest publishing houses, the Czech News Center.

Together, these three companies form the dirty 'troika' of the Czech coal business. The coal tycoons have made sure that nobody gets in the way of monumental electricity exports of up to 20 per cent of all production, exports which have indeed become a key feature of the Czech energy policy in the past two decades with the country repeatedly ending up in the global top ten for electricity exports. Their profits skyrocketed accordingly, often channeled into tax havens, as in the case of Pavel Tykač who has sucked tens of billions of crowns from coal companies to his letterbox enterprises in Cyprus.

## **The roots**

Until recently, due to the lack of awareness about the climate crisis, struggles around coal in the Czech Republic have focused mainly on its impacts on health, landscape and, most importantly, human habitation. The first of these struggles was the non-violent defense of the village of Libkovice, set to be demolished for coal, shortly after the Velvet revolution. For the early environmentalists and founders of the first eco-organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, many of them students who participated in the protests that brought down the socialist dictatorship, this struggle has been symbolic: no more villages should be destroyed.

*For a new generation of climate activists looking for a front line from which to confront the fossil fuel industry, the threatened town was an obvious choice*

Even though Libkovice lost its struggle for survival, weakening hopes that the new-founded democracy would set itself on a more environmentally friendly course, the early 1990s marked some progress: in 1991, the first democratic government created so-called 'territorial limits' to mining, set to protect other human habitation from the diggers, even though they allowed mining to continue until at least 2050. Both coal tycoons and environmentalists have for some time respected this compromise, with conflicts erupting sporadically over the permits of various power plants.

It was only after more than ten years of relative peace that the Czech Coal company began lobbying for the territorial limits to be breached, which would have led to the destruction of the town of Horní Jiřetín, home to two thousand people. These 'limits' have thus become the battle lines in a protracted struggle for the survival of the community, in which local inhabitants and activists united in an association named 'the Roots' (Kořeny) are linked with established NGOs.

## **'We are the Limits'**

For years, Horní Jiřetín has been hanging in the balance, on the verge of being mined away for the coal which lies beneath its houses, streets and gardens. In 2015, this conflict came to a head just as the world was preparing for historic climate talks in Paris. Against this backdrop, the fact that the Czech government was entertaining the option of expanding coal mining – and razing homes to do so – was symbolic of the perceived absurdity of the Czech energy policy.

For a new generation of climate activists looking for a front line from which to confront the fossil fuel industry, the threatened town was an obvious choice to rise up and demand action. Together with locals and NGO environmentalists, younger activists rallied to oppose the town's destruction under the slogan '*Limity jsme my!*' ('We are the limits!').

Just weeks before they would preach "responsibility towards future generations" in Paris, the social-democratic government of the time ruled to spare the town but trash the climate: even though the limits were saved in the vicinity of Jiřetín, they were broken on a different nearby mine, where operations were prolonged until 2035.

## **From climate camps to climate movement**

The bitter-sweet result prompted many of the younger activists to reflect on the movement's strategy. In contrast to their predecessors, the 2015 protestors' emphasis was already on mass mobilisation rather than lobbying, and they opted to frame energy struggles in terms of climate justice rather than ecological modernisation.

Inspired by the actions against coal in Germany, the *Limity jsme my!* initiative has been progressively transformed into a campaign for an 'immediate coal phaseout', aiming to organise a broad, inclusive and participatory climate movement. In 2017, the very first climate camp, modelled on European counterparts, was organised – an event which culminated in a mass civil disobedience action which shut down the very mine that was expanded two years earlier.

*Away from frontline communities directly impacted by the coal industry, new grassroots groups are emerging*

With further climate camps accompanied by mass blockades, dozens of smaller events, and generally reinvigorated campaigning against coal on climate grounds in the following years, the movement was progressively growing even before this year's 'climate spring'. It was from this fertile ground that many of the youth climate strikers have taken inspiration.

Away from frontline communities directly impacted by the coal industry, new grassroots groups are emerging: Universities For Climate, Medics For Future, and a Czech branch of Extinction Rebellion, to name a few. A week-long decentralised mobilisation connecting these groups was organised during the September climate strike, with over 150 events in up to 50 locations, and almost 10 000 participants. While this may seem small compared to the scale of climate protests in neighbouring Germany, for example, a potential for a significant growth in the numbers and strength of the movement is now apparent.

In terms of party politics, the fast-rising Czech Pirate Party has largely stepped in the boots of the struggling Green party [read more on the 2017 Czech legislative election results [here](#)] as the champions of the movements' demands, providing – after years of absence – a parliamentary platform for ecologically progressive policy as a vigorous opposition.

## **The coal commission as a trap**

As important as the formation of the government's coal commission is as a signal of changing winds, it would be a grave mistake not to see it for what it is: a trap. Packed with pro-coal hardliners, even if the commission were to bring forward the industry's deadline to 2040 and thus shorten its life span by fifteen years, this would still be too late.

According to coal phaseout pathways consistent with targets to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, all coal-power generation in OECD countries must be off grid by 2030. The rise of vibrant civil society inspires hope that the coal commission will be rightly recognised as a smokescreen to obscure the real state of affairs. For the fact remains that, even though the feasibility of a renewables roll-out sufficient to completely replace coal in the Czech Republic by 2030 has been proven beyond doubt, policy is going in the opposite direction.

On the very same day that the Czech government formally authorised the set-up of the coal commission, the Ministry of Environment under Brabec put the final stamp of approval on the expansion of the Bílina mine, prolonging its life span beyond the critical 2030 deadline. Similarly, instead of substantial unnecessary capacities of coal power plants being shut down to reduce emissions, their operations are being prolonged by their owners with tacit agreement from the government.

Contrary to the movement's demands to close down old power plants, these are now instead being privatised into the hands of coal tycoons like Pavel Tykač. Having already bought and partially retrofitted the Chvaletice power plant, not far from Prague, Tykač is now eyeing Počerady, the most polluting power plant in the country and among top 30 dirtiest power plants in European union. Moreover, instead of closing down these operations, the state is facilitating their continued operation by granting them exemptions from the new European air-quality regulations.

## **Exposing hypocrisy, avoiding a 'culture war'**

In such a situation, what should be the way forward? From breaking the silence and alerting society to the problem, there is still a long way to go to expose the institutional failures at its root and building active majority support for change. Politically speaking, especially as the result of the coal commission can be presumed to be unsatisfactory, the conflict over its meaning will likely be among the most important landmarks in the coming year.

Here it will be necessary to expose the hypocrisy of the government and to use the opportunity to increase long-term pressure for a paradigm shift in energy policy. Both actions of mass civil disobedience and street protests have succeeded in pushing the debate forward, but in order to grow they need to become more relatable and grounded in sustainable structures of day-to-day, bottom-up organising. To lay the ground for that, trends towards isolation in comfortable 'identity activism' must be avoided, and new alliances worked out instead.

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More than anything else, this path forward makes it essential to avoid the framing of the climate struggle as yet another 'culture war' between metropolitan liberals and small-town conservatives – a framing already being imposed by right-wing populists, who have greatly benefitted from this logic in previous clashes over foreign policy or the rights of refugees. These divisive politics have in recent years allowed authoritarian politicians such as Czech President Miloš Zeman or Prime Minister Andrej Babiš to successfully hegemonise the political center, something which has occurred not only in the Czech Republic but also in neighboring Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.

This framing has also been historically supported by a large segment of the post-privatisation billionaire class, to which both Babiš and Tykač with his fellow coal tycoons belong, through their influence in politics and media. Channeling the frustration of marginalised classes, largely originating in the discontents of the post-socialist

transition, towards nationalistic passions has allowed them to let themselves off the hook and displace a social conflict into a cultural one.

## **A struggle for the common good**

If progressives are to be successful again in the post-socialist space, they need to rediscover the ability to link their ‘noble causes’ – including the climate – to a credible vision for a more just and inclusive society. This will not be easy, or fast. But as the unprecedented success of former environmental activist Zuzana Čaputová in the Slovak presidential election shows, when articulated as a question of the common good rather than individual taste, even demands usually perceived as quintessentially ‘metropolitan’ concerns are capable of gaining majority support.

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If the fledgling climate movement wants to stand on firmer ground in Czech society, it should take these lessons seriously and strive to link energy struggles to the multitude of other discontents in the context of the increasingly authoritarian Czech brand of capitalism: a shortage of housing, low wages and long working hours, or the plight of the very regions where coal is being extracted.

The challenge is to present the vision of a decarbonised economy as an opportunity to also address structural issues which are at the core of much of the frustration with the thirty years of post-socialist development. When the present wave of mobilisations temporarily subsides – as is sure to happen – it must dig in for the long haul of overturning historically embedded structures of power and wealth, which are behind our interlinked social and ecological crises.



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