

“Politics Isn’t Always Fun”: Institutionalising the Climate Fight

An interview with Janmejai Tiwari, Lena Schilling

January 2, 2025

The climate movement has historically had a strong grassroots element, but there is more to democratic participation than activism. Bridging the gap between the streets and public institutions can help align climate efforts and drive systemic change. *An interview with Lena Schilling.*

Janmejai Tiwari: You are the youngest member of the European Parliament, elected in Austria. Could you briefly recount your trajectory?

Lena Schilling: I have been a climate activist for years. I started with climate protests in 2019, like many young people, when Fridays For Future held its first demonstrations. In Austria, I spent a year occupying the construction site of a proposed highway – I remember that as a defining moment for me. It was the biggest occupation that ever happened in the country. It really was a big thing. Eventually, the Green Minister of the Environment, Leonore Gewessler, intervened and decided to stop the highway project. At that moment I understood that the right people in the right position at the right time can really make change happen. Later, the Green Party approached me to become their lead candidate for the 2024 European elections in Austria, and I accepted.

How did your involvement with Fridays For Future shape your approach to activism and politics?

Another inspiring moment for me was the first big international climate protest on 15 March 2019. We were preparing for it, and I remember I was a bit sick those days. But going to bed the evening before, watching young people in other countries taking to the streets and starting the protest, knowing that I would do the same the next day, and that other parts of the world would follow, felt like a powerful experience. It’s such a strong feeling to be part of an international movement, to be connected with all these people who share the belief that they can make change happen.

I felt that again the day after, when I was on stage, giving a speech at the demonstration. There was so much energy in that moment. I think that’s how we change societies.

What motivated you to shift from grassroots activism to institutional politics?

There are various forms of participation, of protest, of things we want to engage with, and at one moment I thought, “Hey, that’s just another way to participate in democracy. Let’s just try it.” I’m still figuring out what change can look like, because we need fundamental change in so many aspects of society, and there are so many things we need to transform. And I thought, maybe institutional politics is one way to achieve that. After five years in the European Parliament, I believe I will know whether politics is the right thing for me or not.

I see institutional politics as one path among many: I’m still convinced that it’s important to take to the streets, because politics happens there. It happens when people talk to each other, when they share and stand up for their ideas. Politics is much more than parliamentary work, even though that’s essential too.

Our latest edition – Head On: Facing the Far Right!

Read it online or get your copy delivered straight to your door.

[READ & ORDER](#)

What challenges did you face when you decided to run for elections?

The biggest risk, I think, is losing the sense of collectivity. When you're in the climate movement, you're always surrounded by friends and fellow activists, and you feel deeply connected. In the European Parliament, especially as a young woman, it's not always that easy to feel part of something collective. We mostly work against each other. The elections delivered a right-wing parliament, with a strong far right, and many old white men saying awful things. Standing up to them and fighting against their harmful rhetoric is important, but I do sometimes miss the collective energy of the climate movement.

As an elected politician, are you managing to keep a connection with the activist movement?

I see my role as both a privilege and a responsibility. I still feel connected to the people who are fighting for climate justice across the globe. In many parts of the world, it's harder to do that now than it was in 2019, so I don't want to focus too much on my feelings or my personal priorities. What matters is what we need to do to achieve climate justice, and I'm committed to doing my very best to fight for that goal. We have a great chance to deliver real change, and my goal is to work towards that.

As politics turns even more hostile to climate activists, how can we better involve young voices from different regions – especially the Global South – in shaping the international climate justice movement?

First, we need to bring them to the negotiation table. Too often, we talk about the Global South without actually listening to its voices, and that's simply not enough. Right before COP29 in Baku, we invited climate activists from Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA) to the European Parliament in Strasbourg so that we could hear their perspectives.

Second, I think we need to connect young and aspiring politicians from different regions to share experiences. In the Global South, it is sometimes harder to stand up and gather support, but as a global climate movement, we need to ensure activists and politicians from every region have equal space to participate.

*Politics isn't always fun, but it gives you the opportunity
to change things while still staying connected to the
movement.*

You seem to be touching on the fundamental difference between tokenism and real participation, which is often lacking at international climate discussions, including at COPs. How do you evaluate COP29 and UN climate conferences in general?

The first, obvious priority is more substantial climate finance for loss and damage, as well as adaptation. The world's biggest oil companies are making profits four times greater than the amount needed to address loss and damage in the Global South. This is insane. It shows that there is money available,

and there would be ways to get so much more money if we seriously discussed taxing fossil fuel companies and very rich individuals.

We also need more ambitious mitigation. We can't just talk about what has already happened; we need to look at the future, and we need money to transform our energy systems.

My third point is about human rights. The European Parliament used very strong language in its resolution ahead of COP29. People who are fighting for climate justice regularly get arrested in countries that host UN climate conferences. I'm thinking, for example, of Anar Mammadli, an activist just like us. Or Nargiz Absalamova, a 26-year-old journalist who was arrested in 2023 for reporting on environmental protests. That's completely outrageous.

Addressing these issues is important not just during COPs but also afterwards, because the repression will be even harder once the international attention has faded.

At COP29 you worked on the campaign to make polluters pay. How do you assess the attitude of richer countries towards their responsibility for climate change?

I think the attitude of some Global North countries is extremely harmful. At COP28, commitments and promises were made, but in Baku, we saw the Global North breaking some of those promises, and that's something we can't afford. We need trust and cooperation to deal with the climate crisis, and if we are not able to make deals that hold, it's a very bad sign for global climate action.

It's not just countries; companies are also delaying effective action. We need to talk much more about the fossil fuels lobbyists running around at climate conferences.

What is your vision for bridging the gap between activism and policy-making to tackle the climate crisis?

We need to think about politics more broadly. The people fighting for climate justice should also have a voice in policy-making. I find it crucial that politicians be reliable and aware of the fact that the people fighting on the ground are doing extremely important and hard work. As politicians, we need to build trust. I want activists to trust me and find ways to work together, because the question of climate justice will only be answered if many different people come together and find solutions.

Activists are often not eager to jump into institutional politics because they think it's not fun. What would you tell them?

It's true – politics isn't always fun. But it gives you the opportunity to change things while still staying connected to the movement. The image of politics as a business for old white men is not what the future should look like. If many people with different perspectives and experiences go into politics, we can change the system. That's what I'm trying to achieve, and I would love for many more people to join this fight through institutional politics too. It is extremely important – and yes, sometimes fun too.



Janmejai Tiwari is a young activist from India. He has been a part of climate justice movements in India for a decade. He has also been active with the Young Greens and youth movements at transnational level. He has been leading the delegation of the Global Young Greens (GYG) for COP since COP 26 in Glasgow. He has been associated with Global Young Greens and Asia Pacific Young Greens Network (APYGN) in different capacities. He is currently the Secretary-General of the GYG. He is based in Almora, Uttarakhand, a Himalayan region in Northern India.



Lena Schilling is the youngest member of the European Parliament, elected in Austria. Previously, she was a climate activist with Fridays For Future.

Published January 2, 2025

Interview in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/from-public-squares-to-the-institutions-the-fight-for-inclusive-climate-action/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.