

## Inside Earth Uprising: Environmental Activists Defying Suppression

Article by Barney Cullum

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Attempts by the French government to outlaw the radical environmental organisation Earth Uprising were short-lived and only strengthened the movement's reach. While government hostility is a very real threat to activists across Europe, the existential dilemma they face is a different one: what are the most effective tactics to protect the environment and garner majority support in society?

Where is the epicentre of the many environmental protest movements creating tremors across Europe? Andreas Malm, author of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, nominated France when asked that very question at the premiere of the film adaptation of his book last year. Radical tactics deployed by Les Soulèvements de La Terre (Earth Uprising) "put everything else in the shade", according to Malm. An uncompromising direct action proponent, Malm comes from Sweden, which became synonymous with green campaigns after Fridays For Future's global school strikes for climate began in Stockholm six years ago.

Earth Uprising comprise a coalition of activist associations deploying confrontational direct action tactics to combat businesses that threaten the climate, ecosystems, and the sustainability of small farming. The collective says water hoarding companies working in industrial-scale agriculture are behind these threats. It has also challenged construction projects such as new highway developments which stand to damage arable land.

The French government ordered Earth Uprising to disband last summer, invoking legislation they had passed two years earlier to mitigate for far-right and Islamic extremist groups. The legislation, originally designed to reinforce French secularism following the brutal murder of schoolteacher Samuel Paty, was suddenly being applied to environmentalists.

### Gathering appeal

Things had come to a head in the spring. A demonstration over a vast crop-watering project in Sainte-Soline, western France, led to 5000 protesters clashing with more than 3000 police officers. Protesters said the battle for water, which attracted international attendance from sympathisers based in Chile and Mali, represented a "fight for life". The reference was to the dangers of water shortages, not the stand-off itself. No-one died in Sainte-Soline.

Explaining the subsequent dissolution of Earth Uprising, Olivier Veran, a spokesperson for the interior ministry, told CNews that the action was taken "not because of its ideas [but] because there is violence or a risk to public safety." Greenpeace accused the government of setting an "extremely shaky standard". French appeal courts agreed and came down on the side of the protesters. The dissolution of Earth Uprising "did not constitute an appropriate, necessary and proportionate measure to the seriousness of the disturbances likely to be caused to public order," affirmed France's Conseil d'Etat on overturning the ban in November.

The United Nations had earlier expressed sympathy for Earth Uprising, saying the “tear gas grenades, stun grenades, explosive sting-ball grenades, and rubber bullets” reportedly aimed at protesters in Sainte-Soline represented an “excessive” use of force. “We can only thank Gerald Darmanin [Macron’s Interior Minister] for the publicity, says Benoit[1], a representative spokesperson for the La Rochelle committee of Earth Uprising. Within one month of Darmanin outlining his intention to shut down the movement, three new regional committees were established in defiance. The Angouleme (Charente) chapter was the first to rise up, swiftly followed by Saintonge, and then La Rochelle itself.

“Our La Rochelle committee was created by a group of activists from another organisation on the eve of the date on which the government first intended to issue a decree of dissolution,” Benoit continues. “We were established by a few activists from ATTAC [an environmental and social justice outfit] and then quickly joined by green activists from other groups including Extinction Rebellion and Bassines Non Merci.”

“The decree was postponed several times before being published. But it was indeed the threat of dissolution which precipitated the creation of our committee, with the aim of supporting the Earth Uprisings and avoiding their dissolution. Each time the threat of dissolution was repeated, it created an influx of activists.”

Over 150,000 signatories petitioned against the dissolution and further committees were formed ahead of the appeal being heard. Earth Uprising enjoys support from small, independent “organic and agro-ecological” farmers, while it is opposed by big business, cooperatives and the FNSEA (farmers’ union), in addition to regional authorities.

## **Strength through adversity**

The La Rochelle division of Earth Uprising expressed themselves creatively during the brief period when the movement was banned, mitigating the risk of arrest while maintaining irreverent defiance. “The dissolution changed nothing,” Benoit insists. “Our banners displayed ‘friends of Earth Uprising’ rather than “Earth Uprising” itself, which obviously fooled no-one, but we did not feel any significant police pressure in that period.”

The experience proved a formative moment for Benoit and his peers within their new committee. The dynamic of living through dissolution developed their skills and network, which could prove invaluable should a second assault on their freedom of assembly be instigated this year – something Benoit suggests remains a possibility. “When the ban was imposed, it led both to greater motivation among activists and a desire to avoid legal trouble,” says Benoit. “Our young committee, with little experience in actions of civil disobedience, stayed much more pragmatic than some wanted. During the short period of dissolution, we only demonstrated and acted with the aim of contesting this dissolution, which was legally permitted.”

“In addition to a significant influx of new activists, the dissolution, like any repression, motivated us to forge greater solidarity with and between activists and committees. Our membership contains students, farmers, nurses, teachers, unemployed people, and others. Personal connections were created and mutual assistance will be easier and immediate in the future if we need to draw on one another.”

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It is difficult for authorities to dissolve a movement made up of a fluid network, with autonomous divisions whose members sometimes participate across groups and even contribute to external activist organisations. “Other committees have organised more disobedient actions typical of Earth Uprisings such as the A69 protest [and] some of our activists may have joined in,” adds Benoit, elusively. The A69 protest saw hundreds of campaigners mobilise during the dissolution to build a small wall and stage sit-ins during the construction of a second road designed to connect Toulouse with the town of Castres. The action was taken to protest the impact car and lorry emissions from highway construction and increased vehicle use would have both on arable land and global warming emissions.

## **What comes next?**

Earth Uprising is attracting increasing international attention for its bold direct action; Andreas Malm is not the only one taking note. International media outlets and policymakers alike are both watching on with interest to see how things evolve. “Seen from France, it is not obvious that we are more courageous and creative than others,” says Benoit. “The strong point of our movement is certainly the use of civil disobedience, decentralised but coordinated.”

“Each committee organises the actions of its choice, on local subjects, regional or national, with complete autonomy but with mutual assistance between committees. Action on national issues arises from the struggles of local committees.”

“The second reason for the vitality of the movement is the contemptuous and obtuse attitude of the government towards the population of France. When people are not listened to within the framework of planning bodies (associations, unions, etc.), they resort to other means to make themselves heard.”

Benoit is disinclined to disclose what’s next in his region of France, on the southwest coast, referencing the importance of maintaining the “element of surprise”. However the movement’s national website [shares details](#) of a national mobilisation during the Paris Olympics this summer, targeting “mega reservoir” projects. Sustained subversion invites the inevitable question: does the movement enjoy popular support among the wider public? And how will politicians and the media receive the group’s future campaigns?

## **Fair representation**

These themes were examined last summer, while the dissolution was in place, via [polling](#) commissioned by the Climate Journalism Network. Data indicate wider support for direct action tactics deployed by environmentalists in France (28 per cent) than in the UK (23 per cent) and Germany (17 per cent). Researchers stressed the importance of recognising that support for direct action protests varies considerably across demographic groups: it is stronger among the under 35s and stronger still among those who self-identify with the political left (46 per cent), but even here there is not majority support.

The pollsters also asked how fairly different sources, including the media and politicians, presented these protests. In terms of news coverage, around a quarter of respondents in Germany (22 per cent) and France (25 per cent), and one third in the UK (33 per cent), think that what they read, hear, and see on the subject is fair, with around one quarter in each saying it is unfair. Researchers concluded that

these opinions likely reflect the fact that, although protests can be a divisive issue, much coverage does not explicitly judge these events.

The study found broadly similar proportions of respondents in each country agreeing that direct action protests were discussed fairly by politicians (compared with the media). However, a higher proportion in France (31 per cent) think that the government discusses the issue “more unfairly” than the media, compared with respondents’ views in the UK and Germany. France, the UK, and Germany were all among the very first nations to recognise and declare a climate emergency in 2018, as Sweden’s school strikes spread globally. But the trio’s governments have all shown signs of becoming less aspirational of late, watering down their green commitments.

## **Sprawling presence**

UK and German governments have delayed their transitions to green economies, while France infamously rejected the majority of recommendations made by its groundbreaking climate citizens’ assembly, disappointing participants. Throughout 2023, Britain’s most influential environmental activist, Roger Hallam, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, attempted to overwhelm the court system by mobilising hundreds of Just Stop Oil activists into getting arrested as resistance to the granting of new oil and gas licences by government. However, in a New Year’s Day blog post, Hallam indicated he would be changing tactic, suggesting orchestrated disruption had now become unnecessary, as the collapse of power “under the weight of its own contradictions” has become “inevitable”. In Hallam’s view, Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion will be remembered as the “pre-cursors” to a successful green revolution.

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In Sweden, the school strikers led by Greta Thunberg have graduated into committed activists deploying eclectic approaches, from strategic litigation through to blockades of oil tankers. At the time of writing, Aurora’s legal activists are waiting for a verdict from Sweden’s supreme court on whether the state has obligations under human rights law to further its environmental commitments. Weekly school strikes continue outside the Riksdag (Swedish parliament), but numbers are dwindling. This is down to another form of suppression: rules were introduced in response to Greta’s campaign, stipulating that student loan payment are to be withheld if students skip lectures to attend climate protests.

As has been seen in France however, crackdowns in Sweden have been met with equal and opposite reactions of solidarity. While Fridays for Future strike attendance has been made harder by the financial penalties imposed, Grandparents for Future, an organisation of relatives fighting for the prospects of their children’s children, is steadfast in convening larger protests of their own outside the Riksdag. Inya Borra, from Malmö, is among those who regularly joins. She says she is fighting for her 13-year-old grandson: “I want him to have a life, a future, without having to fight for food, or for water, or for whatever. I want him to have a future to live in.”

Borra reveals that she has recently been supporting a fellow member of Grandparents For Future in court. Just like the younger activists of Earth Uprising, some members of Grandparents For Future are now joining road-block direct actions of their own in Sweden. “My friend will probably just get a fine rather than a jail sentence,” Borra adds, shrugging off the potential ramifications.

Across Europe, movements are being built, being challenged, then rebounding bigger than before. Governments need not resist, of course. And not all are doing so. In the Netherlands, following a march of tens of thousands last autumn, politicians pledged to end fossil fuels subsidies.

Earth Uprising, in its varying formats, is making diverse impacts across a spectrum of green causes. They look set to continue in many European geographies, if not all, irrespective of any further attempts that may be made to stamp them out. Environmentalist protest roots are underground, invisible, and sprawling.

[1] The pseudonym “Benoit” has been used in this article to preserve the interviewee’s anonymity, honouring their request for their identity not to be disclosed.

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