

# **Chapter 1: The Second Global Strike and the Preparations for the Week for Future**

April – August 2019: The task of civil society

---

The first big wave of rebellion is over. While a certain exhaustion spreads among the activists, the movement is now really spilling over to the wider public and changing political events. Influenced by the global strike and the actions by Extinction Rebellion, by Greta's speeches to the EU and to the British parliament, but also by the new BBC documentary film with David Attenborough on the climate crisis, governments and individual cities begin to declare a climate emergency. City after city follows suit in Switzerland and Germany (starting with Constance), and then globally, under pressure from the young people's climate strike. A large part of the movement's energy is currently flowing into this project; new "climate emergency" Facebook chats are formed. Statements on the emergency are also formulated with concrete proposals for change for schools and universities (see <https://www.cedamia.org>).

In Mynttorget, the realisation is taking hold: something fundamental has changed. The question is often no longer whether there is a climate crisis, but how to respond to it. The global group of activists has succeeded in making a first crucial step, a historic breakthrough. Right? The EU elections are coming up in May, a measure of whether European populations are really taking the project seriously. The young people cannot vote. The hole in our democracies can hardly show itself more clearly than it does in these weeks: it is their future which is at stake, and yet they have no formal say. And the task which the Mynttorget group took on last September has not been completed. The newspapers report every day that the Paris Agreement is scarcely being upheld by any country. We read in the UN reports that the global community is heading for a world which is three degrees warmer (Emissions Gap Report 2019).

The basic question is still: how can the world be united in the struggle for a safe future for everyone? How can we establish political rules worldwide which will force societies to transform every sector, in such a way as to establish greater justice and more democracy, and to dismantle the structures of domination? The first global strike was a historic step in the right direction, many people think. But what comes now?

One thing is clear: the adults are needed. They can no longer stand on the margins and applaud; and broader groups in civil society must take action, not only those who have already been committed to protecting the environment for the last forty years. But those are the ones who are now being talked about. In May, those who are globally responsible for the big environmental associations and NGOs begin to interfere in the situation. The question becomes more urgent on the day of the second global strike and a risk emerges, as well as an opportunity: the idea of a much bigger global “movement of all movements” comes up for the first time, one which can be joined by all people everywhere, of all ages. But this also means a threat (which will never disappear) that these NGOs will undermine the networks of young activists and make their democratic processes impossible.

It is early morning on the 24th of May, and birds can be heard twittering in the park. The whole group has gathered in a circle in one of the subterranean theatre spaces which are otherwise used by world-famous performers. The atmosphere is tense. These rooms are located under Stockholm’s central park, the royal Kungsträdgården. Up on the huge stage, the second global strike is about to take place, because the EU elections are in two days.

“We have to stick together,” say some voices. Everyone nods. What has happened? The previous day, the older “superstars” of the established climate movements, many of them linked to NGOs, published an article in *The Guardian* which has caused an uproar. This is not because of the basic idea: it is true that the young people are now asking the whole of civil society, including trade unions, to join them in September as part of a huge strike day. Older people cannot simply watch and applaud but have to take responsibility. But the NGOs didn’t consult the young people properly before naming the 20th September as the date of a monumental global general strike. As would become clear, this was not agreed with “the” movement (that is difficult; there are still the discord platforms in parallel with WhatsApp groups and so on), but at best with a few individuals close to the NGOs. Most of the strikers had already agreed months ago on the 27th of September as the next strike day, together with the organisers of Earth Strike, who are all young volunteers, not

paid NGO employees. And many countries had already communicated it that way: we're going on strike on the 27th of September, us young people, and we call on the unions to help us. Many adults had taken the day off or informed their workplaces.

And now they are suddenly there: the much bigger NGO heavyweights, announcing their own climate strike campaigns, even with a website of their own, which many of the young activists see as a provocation. It is their strike, after all, and they don't want to lose control over it, especially not over internal democratic processes. Many of them writing in the global FFF communication channels feel caught out when the message is quickly spread – on the night before the global strike, of all things. A kind of collective nervous breakdown sets in; and during the strike day, everyone is so exhausted that the events surrounding the EU elections pass many of them by. The unity of FFF is more important; all misunderstandings must be cleared up. The adults have to take their cue from the young people, and not the other way round.

But in these months, there is a sense of despair over whether the democratic autonomy of the movement can be preserved in the face of the individual, often male NGO workers in the Global North, who are trying ever more obviously to put together a controlling “elite group” within the youth movement. What happens in the next weeks and months represents a historic opportunity, I often think at that time, but it also brings the danger that everything the young people have built up during this year will fall apart.

In general, it is enough to change something small in a group, a small shift: adults only have to take control slightly more, and then many young people withdraw who used to be active. That's how humans are. Especially young people. That is the subtlety of democratic relations: that we have to pay attention to making sure everyone feels motivated to take part; and that they are also confident in doing so – and that everyone is heard; that there aren't individuals who express their opinions so loudly that that others retreat and think, “Okay, I guess that person knows what they're doing; what do I know about it?” This is the threat in the coming months, and a conflict takes place in which the young people ask the NGOs again and again to explain themselves – and I do the same. They can't actually make individual young people into spokespeople, or form groups whose composition they decide, or influence strategy so as to create more and more demonstrations instead of strikes and more campaigns than disruption.

How to find a balance in the cooperation between young activists and adults, between grassroots movements and paid workers? At the university,

I begin a research project and compare the ways in which the interplay between NGOs and movements including children and young people has been organised historically. Do we need new global guidelines? How might they look?

But from this day on, the question no longer gives me any peace: what would a globally organised uprising look like, including people of all ages? It wouldn't be a mishmash with unclear power relations, that much is clear. FFF should belong to the young people; they have to be in charge. In the dispute over the date of the next strike (the 20th or the 27th of September), I try to mediate between the two sides of the conflict and to give the young people the last word.



In the process, I come across an idea mentioned by some of them: connecting the two days with each other. A few of us, including strike activists, NGO workers and the Earth Strike organisers, write a paper: there should be a Week for Future, a gigantic global protest which governments will not be able to ignore. We can keep both dates, and soon we can all concentrate on the biggest of all projects so far. And still, we cannot possibly suspect that three months later eight million people will go out and protest. In Bern, where Loukina is, there will be 100 000. Despite all this: in the end, it can't just be about ensuring that adults join the strikes, which are becoming more and more like ordinary

demonstrations – they also have to organise themselves into a political force which will make change happen worldwide.

And so, the work begins on planning the joint September strike, together with the established organisations and grassroots movements like XR on the one hand, and the young people on the other. In Germany, for example, the Together for Future platform is created, gathering the whole of civil society. Every week, on Wednesday evenings, everyone comes together in a global Zoom meeting to discuss the situation.

Will people dare to leave their workplaces? In Stockholm, the young people set out and go to all the important unions. Others approach the universities and the students. But what should be communicated as the content of this protest and strike week? What is it now about, one year after the start of the strike? It has to be about a dignified life for everyone, including future generations.

This is our chance, I think to myself, and send a paper to everyone: let us use this week globally to plant the idea in everyone's minds of a shared global movement with a shared goal, and make it clear that this is a global goal and a political one in the broadest sense. After all, some are already going on strike in thousands of squares in 160 countries, meaning almost every country; we have to make our unity clearer and establish a very small number of demands, especially now that the young people are themselves saying that they want us adults to be involved. We are a single world population on a very sensitive planet, and we have to care for everyone together. The first Friday of the Week for Future could be dedicated to this idea; the Saturday could then be focussed on the idea of a carbon budget and action plans, a global budget (of about 350 Gt CO<sub>2</sub>) and a national one, so that it becomes clear to all people how incredibly quickly we have to stop emissions if we want to keep the temperature at a halfway humane level. The third day could then be dedicated to the aspect of "equity" or social justice, which would mean distributing these budgets fairly, so that the richer part world supports the Global South and no longer exploits it. And fourthly, big "citizens' assemblies" based on grassroots democracy should give everyone the opportunity to think about how society would have to be transformed, which rules are needed in which sectors (shifting food to non-animal products, transport away from cars and planes, the financial sector to more democratic structures and away from the financing of the fossil industry, energy towards renewables, and so on). Every day would have to communicate knowledge, give space for discussions, and highlight concrete images of a shared global transformation. All this ought to mean that existing power structures

in which certain population groups are disadvantaged (intersectionally: gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation...) are replaced with non-dominant relationships. Democracy must be strengthened.

This idea for the demands relating to individual days remains a dream, however. Instead, a joint, simple paper is put together, sketching out the basic idea of the week and emphasising the two Fridays: the first as a school strike and the second as a general strike; the unions have to be organised, and halfway through, the UN special climate summit will take place with Greta in New York. We send out the press release, and the world begins to prepare what then brings millions of people out into the streets in September.

We cannot continue to strike and march for an undefined length of time, I think to myself, without establishing a global movement which is also there in the periods between global events. Otherwise, many people will burn out. With these thoughts, the summer holidays begin in Mynttorget. But some are preparing for a longer journey...

In the EU elections, after the global strike, the German greens gain massively in support. Among young people under 30, they become the biggest party, with well over 30 percent of the vote. The European Parliament does not see the shift to the right which many were predicting. In Sweden, there are barely any political changes.