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Scores of Extinction Rebellion protesters face London courts

Green party's Caroline Lucas condemns action against 'brave XR activists'

'Time is running out': Extinction Rebellion activists on why they risked arrest

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Scores of environmental activists will appear in court this week in one of the UK's biggest legal crackdowns on climate protests.

More than 80 people from around the country will go before judges at courts across London charged in relation to the peaceful civil disobedience protests organised by Extinction Rebellion (XR) in April.

The cases come a week before XR's next wave of demonstrations and as public concern grows about the ecological crisis which spurred millions of people to join last week's global climate strikes.

Caroline Lucas, the Green party MP, defended those facing court, saying people who were prepared to take part in nonviolent direct action were showing more "climate leadership than government ministers".

She said: “In the future, it won’t be those peacefully blockading bridges or blocking roads that history judges badly. It will be those who shut their eyes and blocked their ears. The failure to avert the climate catastrophe is the greatest moral failure of our time and people from all generations and all walks of life have had enough of those with power failing to act.

“The brave XR activists taking nonviolent action to protect the planet on which we all depend for our survival shouldn’t be arrested and charged. They should be applauded and they should be heard.”

Earlier this year, it emerged that almost all of the 1,100 people arrested during XR protests in April would be taken to court. Scores of cases have already been heard and the trials are expected to carry on into the new year.

An XR spokesperson said: “The number of people who chose to be arrested in April is vast. It shows that ordinary people of every age, from every walk of life and from every part of the country, are prepared to make great personal sacrifices to get our government to act now on the climate and ecological catastrophe.”

The Metropolitan police have accused XR of causing “high level” disruption and called for courts to pass tough sentences to deter them from causing more chaos when people take to the streets next week.

The 30 defendants facing trial this week are charged with public order offences relating to the April protests. More than 50 others are expected to be in court for plea and directions hearings relating to the same demonstrations.

Mike Schwartz of Bindmans, one of the defence lawyers involved in the XR cases, told the Guardian earlier this year the crackdown by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service appeared to be “a deliberate and expensive” attempt to “browbeat those in society most motivated to do all they can, peacefully but firmly, to mitigate environmental collapse”. He added: “The proportionality and altruism of the community’s actions is in stark contrast to the face-saving short-termism of the authorities.”

Areeba Hamid, a campaigner at Greenpeace UK, said: “As long as our government continues to drag its feet and not take the scale of the climate emergency seriously, more and more people will appear in court for protesting our government’s inaction. Hundreds, if not thousands, have already been charged having taken to the streets to express their anger. How many more will it take before our government takes notice and acts accordingly?”

XR says its three demands of government have not been met: to tell the truth about the ecological emergency; halt biodiversity loss and reduce carbon emissions to zero by 2025; and set up a citizens assembly on climate and ecological justice.

Organisers say thousands of activists will again shut down parts of central London next week, including two bridges over the Thames, to demand governments take urgent action.

An eight-country poll earlier this month found a majority of people recognise the climate crisis as an “emergency” and said politicians were failing to tackle the problem, backing the interests of big oil over the wellbeing of ordinary people.

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