

Radical Repression against Peaceful Climate Protests: Accounts from Zurich

Early in the morning on Monday, 8 July 2019, more than 100 climate activists sent a courageous and clear message: The Swiss financial centre should put an immediate end to its massive investments¹ in climate-damaging projects. True to the motto "We are axing the funds of those financing the climate crisis", the activists barricaded the entrances of Credit Suisse at Paradeplatz in Zurich and UBS at Aeschenplatz in Basel. The two banks have still not responded to this criticism and instead had the blockades cleared by the police the same day. Although the actions were absolutely peaceful, a wave of repression followed which climate activists have not experienced in recent years: A total of 83 activists were arrested and imprisoned (64 in Zurich and 19 in Basel), against whom numerous orders of punishment and fines amounting to several tens of thousands of Swiss francs have now been imposed. This article reveals some experiences from Zurich with the police and criminal authorities, who prefer to protect banks than peacefully demonstrating people.

On the mentioned Monday morning even outsiders quickly noticed that the huge police presence was not just an operation, but above all a demonstration of power. The police shut down traffic around Paradeplatz, then lined up like at a military parade and ran in soldierly columns towards the climate activists. The activists were brutally pushed to the ground, coarsely detained and ruthlessly led away. Then the long wait began in box vans and tied up with cable ties, with some activists even waiting in the suffocating heat in underground garages.

The subsequent searches and interviews revealed that the police were not the least bit interested in keeping the burden on the detainees low. Some of them had to undergo body searches several times and the "Information Sheet for Arrested Persons" (which states the rights of those arrested) was partly not handed out at all or too late. Telephone calls to relatives and to a legal representative were refused and questions about further action were abruptly dismissed. Those arrested with no or little knowledge of German were also refused a translation into French or English; information on their rights and on the forms handed over were harshly withheld.

The sexist violence which female activists were subjected to should be particularly emphasized. Despite loud appeals, their right to be touched and taken away exclusively by policewomen was disregarded during the arrests. The police subsequently made fun of "guessing" their sex with expressions such as "man woman" and "virago". During the body searches, snide remarks were repeatedly made about the bodies of those arrested; one activist was even insulted several times as a "cunt". Furthermore, activists who had their period during their detention were denied sanitary products. They only received them by threatening to smear the cell's walls with their blood.

The public prosecution ordered a minimum of 48 hours imprisonment for all those arrested with the intention of psychological attrition. Although the cells of the "Propog" (the "provisional" police prison at the Kaserne for 28 years, which has already been reprimanded several times by the National Commission for the Prevention of Torture²) are designed for two people, the majority of the activists were imprisoned in isolation. Without contact to the outside world, the cell was only allowed to be left once for an hour for a walk in the courtyard. The prisoners were given no information on what time of the day it was and taking a shower as well as access to pen and paper

1 Banks based in Switzerland do not own any coal-fired power plants or pipelines, but they do play a significant role in financing the environmental destruction currently taking place: The Swiss financial centre emits 20 times more greenhouse gases than the whole of Switzerland (source: www.wwf.ch/sites/default/files/doc-2017-09/2016-05-Study-Climate-Masterplan-Climate-Alliance.pdf) and thus accelerates global warming by 4-6 degrees Celsius (source: www.bafu.admin.ch/bafu/en/home/topics/climate/info-specialists/climate-and-financial-markets.html).

2 Source: https://www.nkvf.admin.ch/dam/data/nkvf/Berichte/2014/polizeigefaengnis_zuerich/150721_ber.pdf

were also often denied. The meagre food was not suitable for people who (have to) eat a lactose-free, vegan, vegetarian or gluten-free diet and was not adapted even after multiple requests. The cases in which the prisoners were denied medical care are particularly blatant - for example, the guards did not even get medication from a prisoner's luggage and another activist had to wait a whole day for the prison doctor.

"Solidarity is a weapon," said an activist when she was released. And she is right: the prisoners of the bank blockade found support in the 24-hour vigil outside the prison and in the solidarity demonstrations that took place around the prisons in the evenings. The goal of the repression is clear: to intimidate and demoralize the activists. The fines and punishments imposed should stop them from further actions. The arbitrariness and contempt with which the prisoners were treated clearly show that the police and the public prosecution have no qualms when it comes to dealing with people who are fighting against the prevailing conditions and for a future worth living. However, solidarity and support have shown that we are on the right track with this action - and that less can happen to us if we are more and stand together in solidarity.

Freedom for the last prisoner of the bank blockade of 8 July: Free Prisoner 49!

Donation for the arrested climate activists: www.campax.org/en/node/520