

Castor how we mobilised people for civil disobedience

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X-tausendmal quer' ('x-thousands block') was founded in 1996, in a remote corner of Lower-Saxony in Germany, called Wendland. The region is known for plans to establish a nuclear waste management centre near the village of Gorleben; former plans for the site included a nuclear power plant, a reprocessing plant, a pilot conditioning factory, an interim storage hall for radioactive waste, and a high radioactive waste repository in a salt mine. Currently, only the conditioning plant and the intermediate storage site are functioning -everything else has been prevented, mainly due to the power of the resistance to these plans since the late 1970s.

In the mid-1990s, the first transports containing highly radioactive waste in 'casks for storage and transport of radioactive material' – the so called 'castors' – were brought to Gorleben. The resistance against them was growing, and several groups mobilised to protest against these transports, but people lacked a concrete concept of how to disrupt them. Many people were on the roads and near the train tracks, but often just stood at the side while the castor rolled by – they were left feeling powerless and disorganised. At the same time, state oppression to resistance was increasing. Groups and individuals were being spied on, and surveillance of people's movements and telephone-use increased (internet use was not common at this point). Many activists in the anti-nuclear resistance in the Wendland felt a need for greater secrecy, but that would have only reduced the number of active people. Another strategy was needed.

Case studies

The call to action

X-tausendmal quer was founded by different individuals from Christian groups, the Centre for Nonviolence (KURVE Wustrow), activists from the office for environment (Umweltwerkstatt) in Verden, nonviolent anarchist activists (associated with the graswurzelrevolution newspaper), and local activists.

In 1996, our main goals were:

- to mobilise a large mass of people for a nonviolent blockade of the next castor to Gorleben;
- to build public pressure to make oppression of activists impossible;
- to give new (nonviolent) impulses to the resistance in Wendland.

We aimed to offer a low-threshold action, that would provide a secure frame through intense preparation in the camp with nonviolent training, affinity groups and consensus decision making, to ensure that everyone's fears and resources were taken into consideration.

To reach our goals we started a call to action, with a self-declaration as the core element; 'I will block the next castor with X-tausendmal quer.' More than 5000 people signed this declaration, which was also a commitment to act non-



THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE BLOCK THE CASTOR TRANSPORTS.

PHOTO: C PALITZSCH

violently towards the police and other people, because ‘we respect the person but criticise the role they are taking’.

The signatures on the declaration were published in the local newspaper. In the weeks preceding the castor transport in 1997, a newspaper page full of signatures (paid for with donations) showed that nonviolent and powerful resistance to the castor transport was growing. We gained political impact, sometimes even hoping that the Lower-Saxony government would cancel the transport in the face of such citizen resistance. As more people from the middle class signed the pledge, the whole campaign gained momentum; people wanted to see their name in the newspaper, to be a part of the big family of resistance in the Wendland.

The public declaration was not just an instrument for internal mobilisation; as more and more people signed the call for action, the probability of prosecution of the signatories decreased. We also hoped that it would reduce police violence against blockaders, as they were no longer an anonymous mass, but individuals from across society, so perhaps making violent attacks less likely.

To reach our goal we printed more than 10,000 leaflets, financed several pages in the local newspaper, held open public meetings, and talked with many people to convince them that civil disobedience is a public responsibility. We understood that direct action is not for everyone, and we offered a wide variety of ways to contribute to the blockade – working in the kitchen, erecting tents in the camp, providing first aid, and everything else that was needed to prepare a camp for several thousand people. The camp acted as a starting point for the blockade and as a safe place to withdraw to afterwards.

The camp and the blockade

On 4 and 5 March 1997, 9000 activists blocked the castor; for many of them it was their first experience of direct action. Students, farmers, teachers, old people, civil servants – all of them with unmasked faces, all willing to risk their bodies and united in the hope for a nuclear free society. Starting at 1am, it took the police over 12 hours to clear the road. Police violence increased during the night, as water canons at freezing temperatures and riot batons were used. Activists endured the pain and remained nonviolent.

As a result of the resistance in Wendland, the Castor transports were stopped for four years, because it was obvious that nuclear waste transports to Gorleben could no longer be undertaken without excessive police violence against nonviolent protesters. It had been not been possible to legally break the resistance and enforce the transports because, according to German law, the police have to adjust their means to the level of violence they encounter, so that against non-violent blockaders only low level violence (like carrying people away) is legally allowed. Everything else is illegal, even if it sometimes still practised.

“I block the castor! You too?”

In the following years we improved our structures and professionalised our volunteer work. We established a list of working groups to prepare the next blockades; media, mobilisation, moderation and training, legal aid, emotional support, strategy planning, technical support, and police liaison.

Every working group consists of a coordinator, regular participants, some ‘learners’, and resource people who are not actively part of the working group. One person is responsible to remind all working groups of their tasks and to control their deadlines. All participants of working groups are listed in a compilation for transparency. We work non-hierarchically, but take into account that people have different levels of experience.



X **Wir blockieren
den Castor!
Du auch?**

Every four weeks we meet in a coordination group with all the members of working groups. In between we have conference calls.

During the later years of the campaign, our slogan was “I block the castor. You too?” To increase our visibility within the anti-nuclear movement, we produced stickers and t-shirts with the slogan, several mobilisation videos for different target groups (<http://www.x-tausendmalquer.de/index.php?id=36>), and a large poster showing people in a blockade combined with a powerful X as our logo.

Unfortunately, X-tausendmal quer was unable to maintain the same level of mobilisation for the next nuclear waste transports after 2000. Many people were appeased by new regulations of the Social Democratic/Green coalition government for a phase out of nuclear power, and other themes entered the political protest agenda, such as the G8 summits in Genoa and Heiligendamm, the financial crisis, genetic engineering, or right wing radicalism.

Though we never managed to mobilise as many activists as in 1997, the thousands of activists who resisted the castor nuclear transports and learned and experienced nonviolence in our blockades, are motivation enough to continue. Also, many of our methods and strategies were picked up by other groups; non-violence training, affinity group structures, and the ‘five-finger-strategy’ (to flow through police lines) are now broadly used in protest movements all over Germany.

Now, as nuclear waste transports to Gorleben have once again been stopped, we continue to act as a loose network of political friends, coming together at other places in Germany to fight against nuclear bombs, for the rights of refugees or against military infrastructures. Experiences and friendships from the struggle in Gorleben will carry on and give us strength and confidence to continue.

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