Free the Soil: How 600 People Occupy One of the World's Largest Fertilizer Producers in Germany

ASEED Europe (Action for Solidarity, Equality, Environment and Diversity) is a grassroots international campaign organization based in Amsterdam. ASEED members and friends organized a bus to travel to the Free the Soil action camp in Brunsbüttel, northwest of Hamburg, Germany. Here is an overview of their experience.

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Day 1

Today on the bus we had some time to get to know each other. And it seems we are a fun group of motivated activists, with most of us doing more with food than just eating food; there are people who work in horticulture, cooks, and students and researchers who are concerned with the ecological and social aspects of agriculture.

Photo: ASEED Europe

We arrived in a structured camp. There is a very large tent for meetings and discussions, various other tents for workshops, legal help, the media team and more. We have built the big tent that we could borrow from the group of refugees We Are Here, thank you for this. The land is flat, the grass is green, the views are wide and the mobile action kitchen Le Sabot is also available. We feel at home here! A little further away, close to the Yara factory, a reception team of 500 agents is ready. What an honor.

People can find the documents we brought online:

Yara, the company - A small brochure explaining the activities and strategy of the world's largest nitrogen fertilizer company.

The Free the Soil Lexicon - A document explaining a selection of concepts relevant to the campaign, including translations of some carbon-related terms into Dutch, German and English.

Disproving the arguments of the fertilizer industry - Yara and the fertilizer industry lobbyists know how to sell their products and views. They explain with various arguments why farmers should use their products and how they are saving the world. Our article breaks down their most commonly used arguments.

Day 2

Our first full day in the camp was also the first day of the International Climate Strike. Demonstrations and other actions worldwide demanded climate justice for everyone. In Hamburg, 100,000 people were on the street, in Berlin 270,000 and in Munich 30,000. In addition, many cities and even villages had their own demo. A group has stepped up action in nearby Itzehoe.

There were many interesting workshops during the day, including on: Animal production and climate change; Small farmers' resistance to Yara in Sub-Saharan Africa; Social ecology in Rojava, Northern Syria; An "indigenous" perspective on the climate crisis. It was therefore difficult to choose.

However, there was a common thread in the day's program: the fight against climate change and for sustainable, social agriculture in the "Global" South. From discussing data on the impact of fertilizers, through aggressive corporate lobbying for so-called 'climate smart agriculture' and the social and environmental impact of so-called 'growth corridors' on Mozambique and other African countries, to campaigns against it. mining of phosphorus for fertilizers. The presentation on Rojava showed how, as an answer, local communities are trying to become independent from large internationally operating companies.

An interesting point emerged during an afternoon discussion about connecting the struggles in the north and south. Campaigns against mining coal and lignite in Europe could lead to the expansion of mining in other parts of the world. Locals who oppose mining are regularly murdered in Colombia. The people from Guatemala and Colombia, who facilitated the discussion, said that in practice it is not possible to organize a climate camp or civil disobedience without risking your life.

The representatives present from "the South" asked us to use our privilege to draw attention to the real significance of climate justice. The discussion clarified the complexity of climate activism and provided meaningful contacts for the future.

Day 3
During the third day the camp buzzes with the action preparations, but in the meantime we exchanged information and learned a lot about the area and its soils. And because there are many similarities with regard to soil, climate and agricultural methods, it is good to take back the acquired knowledge with you to the Netherlands.

Together with more than 100 people and landscape ecologist from the Succow Stiftung from Greifswald, we took a walk through a peat bog. He spoke very enthusiastically and animatedly about public transport peatlands, their history, their role in carbon storage and the large amount of greenhouse gases they currently emit due to the drainage of agricultural land.

Peat is a large mass of wet organic material that has not been composted. Peat soil accounts for about 3% of the world's land area. Only a small part of this has been dewatered for agriculture. It is relatively unknown that twice as much carbon is stored worldwide in peat than in the forests, which make up 30% of the land area! In the natural situation, the peat soil can contain up to 97% water, but when it is dewatered the carbon oxidizes and stored CO2 is emitted. In Germany, only 7% of the agricultural land consists of peatland, but this part is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than the aviation sector. Who would have thought that a

beautiful green meadow is so harmful to the climate? In Germany and throughout Europe, more than 90% of the peat area has been drained and has been irreparably damaged.

By raising the groundwater level, this process can be slowed down, stopped in the longer term and even reversed in the very long term. This also saves the biodiversity specific to the peat. An alternative form of "agriculture" is possible in such an area. Paludiculture is a compromise between nature and production. Various plants can be grown, such as bulrush (reed cigars), which can be used for insulation or building material. However, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP / CAP) makes it very difficult to experiment with this. The owner receives a subsidy for dewatered peatland, but for wetter alternatives it is not considered agricultural land and therefore there is no financial support.

It is important for a group from the Netherlands to take this story home as a lesson. The peatland has been drained in the west of the country for centuries. On top of that, peat is also used as fuel in the form of peat. Thick layers of peat, sometimes up to 10 meters, have been released into the air as greenhouse gases, which has resulted in a gigantic, historic climate debt. And to keep their cows' feet dry and to continue using heavy machinery, farmers are still lobbying the water boards for lower water levels.

You can find more information about this equally interesting and alarming topic on the Moorwissen website. The organization has also made a short animated film on the subject.

The camp has a good relationship with the people in the area. Yesterday, 40 people from the village were given a tour of the camp. They looked with interest at the mobile action kitchen and listened to the explanation about their own electricity system with solar cells. There were also many conversations between the villagers and people from the camp. And even here the story about the peat came back. A farmer said that subsidence is also an important theme here, although the soil here, just behind the seawall and near the Elbe, contains more clay and therefore falls less quickly.

Naturally, we also discussed fertilizers and Yara with that local farmer. We agreed that economies of scale and the growing power of ever-expanding companies are a problem. But "of course" he did use fertilizer to increase his production. So there is still some work to do.

And the camp life? During the night, more buses and more people arrived, with quite a few friends and acquaintances from Belgium. From 200 on the first day, the camp has now grown to about 600 people. It has become a lively place and people are increasingly involved in all kinds of preparations for the action day.

Day 4
We wanted to set up affinity groups that participate in the purple action "finger"; In large civil disobedience actions, the large crowd is usually divided into different groups, or fingers. We will participate in the purple-silver finger, together with people from Belgium, including Brigades d'Action Paysanne.

In general, we do our best to take good care of each other, to be aware of the group dynamics and to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and solidarity. This means that the promotion has no place for macho and / or heroic behavior and that everyone's participation is appreciated. We must avoid any situation that puts people in a vulnerable position.

The camp finger is also very important: it will ensure the provision of food, drinks and all other materials needed in the blocks. It will also be busy with the press, communication and all legal aspects.

All people of the different fingers participate in specific training on group communication, maneuvers and general awareness. What a beautiful sight to hundreds of people with shiny turquoise and purple bandanas move as one, which collectively shout slogans on the local football field.

Day 5 - Action day!
An affinity group attempted to hang a banner in Yara harbor early in the evening. It was intended to be visible from the large bridge over the canal, with the aim of making the action more visible to local residents. Unfortunately, the police were able to prevent this action and 12 people were arrested for a short time.

Photo: ASEED Europe

At 10:00 in the morning, about 500 activists left the camp, marching towards Yara. They blocked two main entrances to the factory without any problems. Yara was expecting us, and so were the police…

The activists came well prepared: tarpaulins were set up to protect against the rain, and they were prepared to spend the night at the location. In the evening, the newly formed golden finger managed to block the third entrance. Unfortunately, this only took two hours. The actions certainly influenced the activities that took place there, but unfortunately did not ensure that it was completely shut down.

Photo: ASEED Europe

During the night, a number of activists managed to enter the site. After some running and climbing in the factory, they were caught, but the images they have recorded nevertheless look exciting.

To get an idea of how the situation developed in real time, check out the Free the Soil ticker.

Day 6

In the morning the golden finger tried to reach the western entrance again. This side of the site was still used to get workers inside and alternate police, which is why this entrance was so well guarded. Although the police behaved relatively calmly during the blockade, at this point they decided it was time to crack down on the activists.

During a meeting, activists decided to end the blockade at 3pm and walk back to camp to celebrate what had been achieved with music and song.

After a few days in the camp, we are a lot better informed about the effects of synthetic plastic, the activities of Yara and many other related topics. But how can we spread this knowledge and our message about better agriculture and society? With a good media strategy team! During the promotion, the Free the Soil media team was very active and fast. Permanent updates were published on the live ticker on the Free the Soil website, on Facebook and on Twitter. Thanks to the good media work, many phone calls and interviews, the mainstream media has released the news of the action in a nice way. In general, the articles about the camp and the actions are positive and often newspapers and websites took the trouble to explain the topic well.

Some newspapers copied a short piece from DPA, a major media company in Germany, by quoting Yara: “our environmental and industrial solutions contribute to the improvement of air quality and to the reduction of emissions”. In previous articles, however, we explained that this is certainly not true when it comes to their main production of ammonia and synthetic fertilizers.

The September 25 Brunsbütteler Zeitung found that Yara's spokesman Udo Stark was misinformed about communicating with Free the Soil prior to the camp. According to him, Yara would have invited the activists to a conversation, but never received a response. This is not correct, because Free the Soil already announced in the spring that they did not want to meet in Copenhagen because this is an international campaign, but that they would like to visit the Brunsbüttel location for a talk and a tour. Yara has never reacted to this again.

A good video report with background information about Yara and their Brunsbüttel department can be found on the website of North German television: Klima-Aktivisten protestieren vor Düngerfabrik. Until today, Yara has made no statement about the action.

How do we look back at the blockade? Some are more positive about it than others, depending on everyone's expectations and goals. But an important conclusion is that we have all learned a lot about how we organize such a camp and mass action. During the trial and the action days, we also learned more about the Yara's site in Brunsbüttel, for the next time.