

USA: The New York City Student Climate Strike

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When I got up the morning of the September 20 world-wide student climate strike, I turned on the TV news with my cup of coffee, and saw a huge, spirited and loud demonstration in Melbourne, Australia, held the previous day, which was September 20 there. I was both surprised and inspired.

Then CNN switched to the march and rallies in New York City underway. The reporter, surrounded by chanting and noisy young people with all kinds of signs, many homemade, was visibly affected, smiling and excited. He said there were hundreds of thousands converging on Battery Park at the lower tip of Manhattan island for a rally.

Then came reports of the actions in country after country around the world, in the imperialist centers and in many of the poor countries of the periphery, with estimates of a total of some four million participating. In some countries, including New Zealand, Spain and Canada, actions were postponed to the following Friday, September 27.

I had no idea that September 20 would be so huge. Greta Thunberg said to a reporter as she marched in New York, "I never predicted this."

It was just over a year ago that Greta, now 16 years old, began skipping school every Friday to protest in front of the Swedish parliament, demanding action to prevent catastrophic climate change. Her action sparked student climate strikes at first in Sweden and then in many countries, culminating in the greatest coordinated demonstration of students and youth in history. Her spark landed on the flammable tinder of millions of young people ready to embrace her message.

I do not know how it happened, but these snowballing actions were organized by young people locally, nationally and internationally, with some help from adult climate crisis groups. This fact alone shows that a layer of young leaders has emerged, and formed networks.

Greta's message was that the looming climate catastrophe threatens the future of young people everywhere, who will bear its brunt. Addressing the adult world internationally, one chant in New York was "You had a future, and so should we!"

Before the September 20 climate strike, Greta addressed the U.S. Congress. This what she said: "I have not come to offer any prepared remarks at this hearing. I am instead attaching my testimony. It is the IPCC [International Governmental Panel on Climate Change] Special Report on global Warming of 1.5 Degrees Celsius, the SR1.5, which was released on October 8, 2018. I am submitting this report as my testimony because I don't want you to listen to me, I want you to listen to the scientists, and I want you to unite behind the scientists, and I want you to unite behind the science. And then I want you to take real action. Thank you."

While there were actions in some 50 cities in the U.S., some in the tens of thousands as in San Francisco, the largest was in New York, on the eve of the September 23 United Nations Climate Action Summit.

The New York demonstration started in Foley Square, across from New York City Hall. Some 60,000 gathered there for a rally to kick off the march. Many joined as the march wound through downtown Manhattan toward Battery Park on the lower tip of the island. There were other feeder contingents on different routes, and people who went directly to the Battery, resulting in over an estimated quarter of a million demonstrators.

Democracy Now had reporters covering the marches and rallies. At the Foley Square initial rally, two of the speakers Democracy Now covered were Varshini Prakash, cofounder and director of the youth Sunrise Movement, and Vic Barrett from the Garifuna peoples of the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent. Here are short excerpts from their speeches.

Vic Barrett: "My people are an Afro-indigenous community.... Despite overwhelming adversity, we organized our community and emancipated ourselves from [French then British] colonization. My ancestors did this to protect the children to come. I am one of those children.

"But the struggle continues for me and my people. Again we are being pushed from the lands we settled, the lands that my family has inhabited for generations. That land will be underwater in a few decades if we continue on the path we are on....

"Indigenous lands all over the planet are being flooded, poisoned and destroyed. My Black brothers and sisters are being gunned down by police. Migrant children are dying at the border. Trans folks are being murdered. Violence is in the air that we breathe

"Some would think that there's no more room for destruction. But I think that all of us here know that, for decades, our [United States] government and governments around the world have consciously put in place policies that have caused the climate crisis we find ourselves in, an emerging crisis threatening my generation with untold violence. But that is an old story, right? We're here to write a new story

"In 2030 the history books will show that faced with imminent destruction, people on the frontlines fought back; that young people rose up around the world to demand immediate action; that starting on this day, September 20, 2019, everything began to change."

Varshini Prakash: "When I first learned about the climate crisis as a kid I felt alone and small and powerless. And I know that is what many young people are feeling right now.

"We have grown up seeing the political establishment fail us. For as twice as long as I have been alive on this planet, we have known about the crisis. For just as long, the wealthy and the powerful have profited off pollution, have lied to millions of people about the science, have choked our democracy with their Big Oil dollars and stolen our futures.

"Today, this generation is taking over! Our days of waiting for justice, our days of waiting for action, our days of waiting to be heard are over! Today we are putting our feet in the streets, and we are not stopping until we get it done! Today, kids don't have to feel small and alone and powerless, because we have a movement that is globally shaking the roots of our society...."

Along the march Democracy Now interviewed activists. Here are a few of them, interspersed with crowd chants around them:

Climate strikers: "Hey, hey, ho ho, climate change has got to go!"

Isabella: "I'm 12 years old. And I'm here today because I believe that age doesn't matter. And, sure, we can't vote, but we still have a voice here. The Earth is really messed up. We should have fixed it a

while ago. And it's just not fair."

Crowd: "We are trying! Trump is lying! The Earth is dying!"

Isabella: "I get really worried about our future, because I keep seeing posts that say 'Oh yeah, by 2030, the world would be at its peak, that we can't do anything anymore.' And I keep thinking, 'Why don't people listen, when things are right in front of their face?' "

Daphne Frias: "I'm 21 years old. I'm a born-and-raised New Yorker from West Harlem. The reason I'm here is because I'm tired of climate inaction. I'm tired of our world leaders ignoring what's really happening to our Earth, and profiting off of the extinction of our planet, prioritizing profit over lives instead of lives over profit.

"Being Latina, my Latina community disproportionately faces climate change because of the institutions that are placed in our communities. We have fossil fuel plants. We have garbage waste plants and many other infrastructures that pollute our environment

"But also, my being disabled We don't have the privilege to up and leave when a natural disaster occurs"

Crowd: "What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!"

Alina Hassan: "I'm from the Bronx High School of Science. And my sign says Exxon Mobile knew about climate change 50 years ago, and they did nothing about it. They actually paid money so they could deny it. They spread propaganda against climate change. And we need to hold them accountable."

Crowd: "Exxon knew! Exxon knew! We are unstoppable! Another world is possible!"

At the huge rally in Battery Park, two of the speakers were Artemisa Xakriabá and Greta Thunberg. Here are short excerpts from their speeches.

Artemisa Xakriabá: "I am 19 years old, and I am from the Xakriabá people in Brazil. I am here today representing the more than 25 million indigenous and traditional communities from the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities. This alliance is formed by four organizations [from Brazil, the Amazon Basin, Central America, and Indonesia]. Together, we protect 600 million hectares of forest.

"But I am also here as a young woman, because there's no difference between an indigenous young female activist like myself ... and a young female activist like Greta. Our future is connected by the same threads of the climate crisis.

"The Amazon is on fire. The Amazon agonizes year after year for the responsibility of the government and its destructive policies that intensify deforestation and drought Climate change is a result of this, and it also helps to make the fires stronger. And beyond the Amazon, there are the fires of Indonesia, Africa, North America, whose suffering has such an impact in my life and in your life.

"We, the indigenous peoples, are the children of nature, so we fight for Mother Earth We are fighting for your lives. We are fighting for our lives. We are fighting for our sacred territory. But we are being persecuted, threatened, murdered, only for protecting our own territories. We cannot accept one more drop of indigenous blood spilled."

Greta Thunberg: "Right now we are the ones who are making a difference. If no one else will take

action, then we will But we are not just some young people skipping school or some adults who are not going to work. We are a wave of change. Together and united, we are unstoppable We will hold those most responsible for this crisis accountable, and we will make the world leaders act. We can, and we will. And if you belong to that small group of people who feel threatened by us, then we have some very bad news for you, because this is only the beginning. Change is coming, whether they like it or not."

On September 23, the UN Climate Action Summit of world leaders was held. The New York Times reported, "Despite the protests in the streets, China made no new promises to take stronger action. The United States ... said nothing at all [Trump listened for ten minutes, then left]. A host of countries made only incremental promises."

Greta Thunberg attended the meeting, and spoke. Her voice quivering with rage, she attacked those present for their inaction. One thing she said was "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

She concluded, "The eyes of all future generations are upon you. If you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you."

Barry Sheppard
