

Lützerath, a village on the abyss

In early 2023, the German village of Lützerath became the symbol of protest against polluting energy production. Climate activists had occupied the village for two years to put an end to lignite mining by energy company RWE in Garzweiler 2: a 48-square-kilometer valley containing 1.3 billion tons of lignite. This fossil fuel is even more harmful to the climate than hard coal.

Day and night, RWE's 100-meter-high machines dig for lignite. Kilometers of conveyor belts transport the fossil fuel to two power plants. These excavators came so close to Lützerath in early 2023 that the village literally found itself on the brink of collapse.

When it became clear that Lützerath would be evicted after years of resistance and legal action, some 500 climate activists from across Europe joined the hard core of the occupiers. The newcomers pitched their tents in the open terrain or sought shelter in one of the farmhouses and houses. The original residents had already been bought out by RWE and found new homes elsewhere in the region.

Energy company RWE built a special road from the valley to the village for the bulldozers and aerial platforms that would demolish the buildings and trees. Police guarded this road to prevent protesters from chaining themselves to the excavators.

The site was initially sealed off with a double row of barriers and more than 100 police vans. On January 11, 2023, a police force moved in. The activists chained themselves to objects and stayed in treehouses and on the roofs of farmhouses and barns. Two days later, most had been removed from the treehouses, roofs, and poles and escorted out by officers. No arrests were made. To prevent evicted activists from returning, all empty structures were immediately demolished by bulldozers.

On Saturday, January 14, several thousand demonstrators made a futile attempt to retake Lützerath from the police. Several confrontations broke out, and some minor injuries were sustained on both sides.

Since 1983, 17 historic villages have been lost to the mining operations in Garzweiler. Energy company RWE is allowed to continue mining lignite until 2030. After that, the hole will be filled with water, creating a lake of 23 square kilometers.