

Drax train hijackers 'planning to turn trial into second protest'

Prosecutors accuse 22 activists who took control of a coal train last year of 'misusing the court process to continue the action'



Activists throw coal from a train destined for Drax power station. Photograph: Martin Wainwright

Martin Wainwright

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Climate change campaigners who [hijacked a power station coal train](#) were accused today of planning to turn their trial into a second public protest on energy policy and global warming.

Prosecution lawyers claimed that 22 men and women who clambered [aboard a 21-wagon supply service to Drax](#) in north Yorkshire last year were bent on "misusing the court process to continue the action."

The dock at Leeds crown court overflowed into the well as the group, aged between 21 and 48, pleaded not guilty to obstructing a railway engine contrary to the Malicious Damage Act of 1861.

The court heard that they had carried out "a well-planned and orchestrated action," halting the train with red flags and fake railwaymen's uniforms precisely by a river bridge which they could use to climb on to the huge coal hoppers.

"They effectively took control of the train," said Richard Mansell QC, prosecuting, "and then started shovelling its coal on to the track below." Makeshift tents were erected on two of the wagons while other protesters manacled themselves to the train and bridge girders, using locks that police specialists did not cut through for 16 hours.

The protest was aimed at greenhouse gas pollution from coal-burning at [Drax](#), the largest power station of its kind in Europe, and fuel trains were disrupted for two days. Mansell told the jury of six men and six women that passenger and freight services had been disrupted, causing financial loss to several companies, and the clearing of the coal and ballast cleaning had cost £30,000.

The court heard that there was a good-humoured atmosphere on all sides during the confrontation, which ended at midnight when a specialist police team unlocked the last protester. One of the group, who are from London, Manchester, Leeds, Wales, the south-east and Scotland, had dressed as a canary. She carried a placard with the words "How many warnings do we need? The Canary". She also joined in a request - which was not met - that the chief executive of Drax come the two miles down the rail line to talk to them.

The jury heard that the group had come thoroughly prepared, with 15 shovels, advice on what to do if arrested and scarves to avoid inhaling coal dust. The two who stopped the train initially told its driver Nicholas Wilson that they were stopping him because there was "a load of protesters on the line ahead". They then revealed that they were part of the group, but assured him that he would come to no harm.

Wilson, who worked for the EWS company that ran the train, had no option but to stop because of the health and safety risk of people on the tracks.

Mansell told the trial, which is expected to last for a fortnight, that the 22 would be representing themselves and were likely to seek political sympathy rather than challenge the facts. He said that there was no question that the train had been illegally stopped and boarded, and the defendants would not seek to deny their actions.

"You may wonder therefore what possible issue it is that you are here to try," he said. "We must wait and see, but the Crown suspects that what is happening here is that the defendants may seek to play on your emotions, and your sympathies with their cause, if you have them, so as to find them all not guilty.

"If you were to do this, by effectively ignoring the evidence, that would not be true to your oath or affirmation. If they are guilty in law of the offence, then the only true verdict is one of guilty."

"The Crown says that they are preparing a misuse of the court process to continue the protest action which they started when they boarded that train just over a year ago."

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