

Interview of Dilan Gohill by Sarine Krovitz

Oct 26, 2021 via Zoom

Dilan Gohill is a climate justice activist and current high school student from Los Angeles, California. He serves as a National Coordinator for Extinction Rebellion Youth US, a climate justice organization that uses non-violent civil disobedience to fight for the environment. Gohill has also worked with other organizations like C40 Cities, which connects mayors and activists from around the world.

SARINE KROVITZ: So just to preface this interview, thank you so much for joining us. I really appreciate your time. This interview, as I said, will be part of an archive that we are creating to document US youth movements in the 2010s. So this interview will only be used for education and future research purposes, it'll be located in the Duke archives, and you'll have access to the final transcript. You'll be able to make any changes or any omissions as needed. Basically, youth activism is understudied, and we're looking to fill that gap. Any questions you have before getting started?

DILAN GOHILL: I'm good. Thank you.

KROVITZ: Awesome. Okay. So just to dive in, it is not common for young people to be involved in activism. What inspired you to get involved in climate justice work?

GOHILL: I think what inspired me is seeing that climate change and the climate crisis was already affecting me and my community, and that things weren't being done. And so I think it was not necessarily "I want to be an activist," but "we have to be". Especially since climate change is one of those issues that's been around for decades, and I think just now we're starting to really realize the consequences and seeing it. And even then people are not acting on it. And so I think, as young people, it's very much like "we know this is a thing, it's happening right now, nothing's being done about it, we're getting affected by it right now, we're getting evacuated because of fires, we're having timers in our shower, we're having cancer, heart palpitations, respiratory problems because of

pollution and oil proximity.” And so I think because of that, that's why I'm an activist, and why I think young people, especially, are activists as well.

KROVITZ: Can you dive a little bit more into how the climate change issues affected you and your community specifically?

GOHILL: Yeah, of course. So I think growing up in Los Angeles, specifically, I was prone to have a higher chance of asthma and other health problems. And I did. And so growing up in Los Angeles with the pollution and the smog and everything going on, I had asthma, but it's not necessarily just about me. I'm one of the many children all across the LA area that have things wrong with their health due to the smoke from factories and refineries and also due to oil drilling. Los Angeles is the largest urban oilfield in the United States, and it's pretty bad because we're having homes, and people growing up, feet away from oil drills. And so because of that, I started seeing things getting connected to climate change. So we're having large Southern California wildfires, they're devastating to the communities that are impacted by the wildfires due to them being evacuated, but also, what we don't realize is a lot of the time the wildfire smoke is hurting those who are already affected by climate change and environmental racism. And so because of that, the wildfire smoke and wildfires affected those who had to be evacuated, but also larger throughout LA County, harming those who had pre-existing conditions. So personally, when these wildfires happened one year, I had to leave the LA area due to the wildfire smoke, and it affected my health like causing flare ups and all that stuff. And then the year afterwards, I was actually evacuated personally, like actually ordered for that evacuation. And so then I started to realize, “Okay, this isn't normal. This is three years in a row, we're having these really big wildfires in this area, that's never really happened before.” Health effects, I can't breathe in my own area, school shutting down. It's pretty bad. And then also connecting that to growing up as well, I remember in first grade distinctly, we had a speaker come into our first grade classroom talking about the drought in LA, and giving us little timers to put in our shower to limit our water usage. And I think because of that, I started realizing, okay, the drought, the wildfires, the smoke, the pollution, this is all affecting us right now. And you take action.

KROVITZ: How did you get involved from that initial passion moment into Extinction Rebellion and the work that you're doing right now?<sup>1</sup>

GOHILL: So I think a lot of the times we think that taking action means going to a beach cleanup or recycling and reducing our water usage or all that, and it's all about individual stuff. So I got involved through that, like implanting little tiny policies in my school, Meatless Mondays, organizing recycling drives, labeling trash cans. And then I started realizing individual change only goes so far when we have these massive corporations and these massive governments polluting the world. 100 companies are responsible for 70% of emissions. I bet that number has grown. And so, because of that, I started realizing this isn't just an individual thing that we can do, we need to get out in the streets and we need to start fighting. And so at this time, I started seeing a lot of activists doing all those school strikes and going out in the streets to protest, and I really opened my eyes to this other side of activism. It's not just reduce reuse and recycle, it's also making a sign and going out there. And so then, I started getting involved with the Friday's for Future movement, all that. And then I kind of started realizing that a lot of the time, these activism spaces were very white centered and white led. And so I kind of was like, "Okay, I've been to a couple strikes, I've been to all these protests, this is awesome, you guys are great." But then I started realizing, "well, there are people being affected by climate change right now in LA specifically and even just around the world that are not having the spotlight that our future is having." And I think the disparity in having our future be a topic of conversation versus the present lives right now, that's when I started realizing, climate change is an intersectional issue that has racial justice tied into it. And so, being a person of color myself, that's when I realized, okay, this is something I can get involved with, this is something I can plug myself into by fighting for racial justice while also fighting for climate justice, two issues that I'm super passionate about. And so that kind of drew me to XR, which is funny, because internationally, it's very white-ish, but I think in the United States specifically, it's a very BIPOC lead and focused organization that has intersectionality at the forefront of each

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Extinction Rebellion Youth US, visit their website: <https://xryouthus.org/>.

of our actions.<sup>2</sup> So you're going to see, every single action XR does, there's a component of racial justice tied into it. And I really resonate with that. I really like how we're having racism and anti racism be the forefront of this movement, which it should be. And prioritizing frontline voices. And so then I start working with XR, And also I really like the theatrical and artistic aspect of XR. XR really prides itself on using theatrics and symbolism and metaphors and all that stuff. Through street performance and stuff like that with protests. And so I'm like, "This is cool. Holding a sign up only goes so far, let's like, dress up or let's do an oil spill or have activists have molasses, which is oil, spilled on them in some symbolic way to show oil pipelines are really bad". And so then I was like, "this is just a really sick movement." And so then I started getting involved there, and then I got involved with the local XR youth chapter here in Los Angeles, and have been with them for almost two years now. And then about a year ago, this January, I became the National Coordinator of XR Youth US.

KROVITZ: That is amazing. So talking about intersectionality, environmental racism, what does including people of color in the movement for environmental justice look like? What do those protests look like when you actually get down to it?

GOHILL: So we have these four demands that we use every single protest. So there's big overarching demands that XR is kind of defined by. And those demands are: "tell the truth", so be transparent to the public, essentially. I'm just summarizing it. The second one is "act now," reduce your global greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 to net zero. And then the third one is: "be led by and for the people," so like People's Assembly in the UK, United States is kind of just listening to people, be drawn by the people. And then a fourth demand is very much XR specific, called "a just transition". And essentially the demand establishes Indigenous sovereignty at every protest, establishes reparations and remediation for BIPOC poor communities. And so essentially, what we do is that every protest, we have a topic. That's how protests work, targeting one group. And so then we think to ourselves, "okay, how can we take these four demands and apply them to this

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<sup>2</sup> XR is an acronym for Extinction Rebellion. BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. For more information on the acronym BIPOC, visit <https://www.thebipocproject.org/>.

one project.” So it'd be like, “Okay, for example, we're targeting JPMorgan Chase, who's funding \$300 billion to the fossil fuel industry since 2016. How do we take these four demands and apply it? So be like, “Okay, well, we want you to be transparent. That's the first demand. Why don't you tell the public and your customers what you're actually funding instead of having activist groups expose you? Two: Act Now. How do you reduce your global greenhouse gas emissions? By stopping funding fossil fuel sources. That's an “act now” type of situation. Then how do we make it a citizen's assembly? Or make it led by the people? Establish a Youth Advisory Council or establish an Indigenous-led council to advise shareholders on where to put your money. And then how do we have a just transition or make us intersectional? Give land back, like the ones that you stole for fossil fuel pipelines. That's giving land back. That's Indigenous sovereignty. Establish reparations for the communities you've funded fossil fuel projects in and are now facing adverse health effects.” And so every protest we do, we take those four demands, and specifically intersectional ones, and at each protest, it's very much we have our demands, but then we also have our demands that are very much centered on Indigenous sovereignty, centered on reparations, centered on, BIPOC remediation.

KROVITZ: That's amazing. Is this a protest that you did do? Is that an example of something that actually happened?

GOHILL: Yes, that's an example of something that we've actually done before. We did that last April. And it wasn't just a Chase. So there's six big banks that fund fossil fuels. And I think we targeted four of them. So Wells Fargo, Citibank, Chase, and Bank of America. And so those are all headquartered in Los Angeles in the financial district, so we did a protest where we went to every single one of those banks, and basically shouted at them and delivered our demands. And then we blocked a road in the financial district right at rush hour, right after work came off. So it's like, “you guys are working in these banks doing all this stuff, and you're leaving, you can't leave. You're going to listen to us.” And so we're doing another one this Friday at another Chase Bank, in collaboration with a bunch of other XR groups and other local groups across the country. It's called the Fossil Free Future Day of Action. And so we're going to be all targeting Chase and BlackRock all across the country to stop them from funding fossil fuels.

KROVITZ: That's amazing. What accomplishments are you particularly proud of? Any major successes?

GOHILL: I think each thing kind of has a little success. The first big protest that I planned was in Hollywood, this was in February of 2020, so pre-pandemic, and essentially what we did was we mobilized in LA and we marched up to the Hollywood sign, to the base of the Hollywood sign, and we spelled the words “wake up” with our bodies. And this was on the eve of the Oscars. So this was on Saturday afternoon, and the Oscars were Sunday. And so we spelled the words “wake up” with our bodies, and we took these drone shots of the words “wake up” with the Hollywood sign in the background, kind of to symbolize the entertainment industry, you need to wake up the climate crisis, and you need to start telling the truth about the climate crisis, making films about it, donating money to it. So our demands were declaring on air at the Oscars, the next day, that Hollywood sits on stolen Indigenous land, acknowledging that, and declaring a climate emergency. XR has this thing called a climate emergency where it's like, once you declare a climate emergency, that's when you can move forward. It's kind of a “disaster mode” type situation. This is an emergency. By declaring a climate emergency, we're going to really get into it. And so we're like we need you declare a climate emergency at the Oscars, donate money to frontlines, support frontline Indigenous people, and also just stop having really harmful movie sets and all this stuff. And so it's a large protest thing that we did. And obviously, having massive demands and having multiple demands, it's hard to have them get acknowledged, all of them. We did this in collaboration with a bunch of Indigenous organizers at the International Indigenous Youth Council, and also with Sônia Guajajara, who was here in the United States to attend the Oscars, actually. And she's an Indigenous activist in the Amazon, and she's so awesome. She actually was there, and so this demand that we had to acknowledge that Hollywood sits in stolen Indigenous land wasn't a new one. It was just one that we're adding to our stated demands. And then the next day, Taika Waititi at the Oscars declared that Hollywood sits on stolen Chumash, Tataviam, and Tongva lands. So we would have loved to have the climate emergency, we would have loved to have the disaster funds and all that kind of stuff getting released, but having one accomplishment

is a big thing. Also, we had a protest at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and we were invited to have a sit down meeting with them later that year, with the head of water, Richard Harasick, in the DWP. And so when I think about it, we don't expect that all our demands are going to get met. We want them to, that's why we're there. That's why they're demands. But I think having one of them being met, or having a meeting with some people, having a seat at the table, offers some sort of like, "okay, I can take this accomplishment and move forward with my life." I can still obviously pay attention to the issue but keep going, like this is going to drive me further. I got this, and now we can push for more. So instead of pushing and pushing and pushing, and nothing happening, if you push a little bit, and the door opens a little bit, you can keep going. You know, small projects.

KROVITZ: Talking a little bit more about those actual physical protests, how does it feel to be in that moment, next to the Hollywood sign or wherever you're protesting? Do you ever have fear of law enforcement? What does one of those actual protests look like?

GOHILL: So it all depends, our protests range in legality and arrestability. So we have done things where it's been completely legal, nothing's going to happen. Obviously not that nothing's going to happen, but nothing legally could happen by the police. Obviously, they can do whatever they want, as we are BIPOC lead group. But there are some things where we've been like blocking a road. Most of the time, we have an old white man be our police liaison, and he'll talk down the police while we mess things up in the background. And so I think that's really important, because we can acknowledge the privilege that white men have and use that to allow us to be radical BIPOC activists. But I think in the moment it's really exhilarating because you have no idea what's going on. The thing is, we're all there because we're angry. We have this thing called love and rage. So the reason we're all there is because there's a rage against the system, this rage against corporations, and rage against governments that have failed us. We're here to save this planet and to save the futures of all the people right now. Saving the future and stopping climate change doesn't just mean my future in 40 years. It means the people who are facing health effects right now. It's their future that we need to talk about. And I think the idea of "protecting one's future" has kind of been co-opted a little bit into like

“my future in 60 years.” But we're all there because we're really passionate about this issue and it's an important issue. I think with things like civil disobedience, like blocking a road, it's like “we're here because we acknowledge that this is the pressing issue that needs pressing action on it.” And so I think it's scary, but I think we're just all fueled by this rage, but also this love for each other and this love for the planet. So I don't know if that answered your question.

KROVITZ: No, it did. That's amazing. I looked into your work a little bit, I saw you also have done some work with global mayors and youth activists. Can you talk a little bit about that and how that looks different from your work with Extinction Rebellion?

GOHILL: Yeah. So I'm involved with this forum with C40 Cities called the Global Youth and Mayor's Forum, which connects I think around nine mayors and I think 14 activists from around the world.<sup>3</sup> And there's two from every continent. There's like three from Asia, three from South Asia, I think three from Africa or something like that. Don't quote me on that. But essentially, the idea behind that is to meet with these mayors as youth from around the world and to talk about the issues that face us and to come together, seeing it from the policy side and also seeing it from an activist side. So at the last forum, we talked about youth advisory councils and having a seat at the table for youth. And I think a lot of the times this kind of differs from what I do as an XR activist. We're these really loud, angry teens that go out and scream at the world. We're calling for systemic change. But obviously we're able to switch when we are invited to meetings with the head of DWP or when we're sitting down with corporations. I just think that this is a really cool thing because at this point, you can see the other side of it and so you can bounce ideas off each other. I think a lot of the time when you protest, it's very much like I'm shouting on a wall, or sometimes it's like I'm shouting at a sponge. So they're taking it in, but you're not getting anything back. So this is why it's important that after protests, we have meetings. We meet with the people we are protesting, usually. If they invite us, if they're not scared of us. And so at the Global Youth and Mayor's Forum, it's great because we're expediting the entire protest. Because I'm not going to protest the

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on C40 Cities, visit their website: <https://www.c40.org/>.



mayor of Milan. Like, what am I doing there? So by being there, it's kind of cool to see what's going on from their perspective, and how they talk and meet with their youth. And I think it's cool to have that little bounce back. And also, what's even cooler is that I'm very lucky because my mayor is actually a part of the forum. So I got to call him out a little bit and talk to him face to face. I was like "What's going on dude?" And so I think it's a really cool thing to be a part of.

KROVITZ: What have been some of the most profound discussions you've had on that forum?

KROVITZ: So this last meeting that we had was in September, and it's very much cop-basd, because these are mayors. And so they're not necessarily involved with the domestic government aspect, because they run their city. And so they're not necessarily involved with the Prime Minister or the president. And so I think it's very profound to hear the initiatives that all these cities are taking. I didn't meet with any mayors until after Joe Biden was in office, I met with youth prior to the election. And I think being a part of that, it's interesting to hear from it because I'm not saying Joe Biden is an awesome climate guy, it's not necessarily that, but I think it's interesting hearing from mayors being like, well, in a time like this, Eric Garcetti, he can only manage what he can do in Los Angeles. He's not responsible for anything that President Trump is doing across the United States. And so I think what's really interesting is hearing the steps that mayors are taking in their own spaces, while sometimes defying the government that leads their country. And so I think that was the most profound thing. I'm really seeing this from their perspective. So if I was in that position, I'd be like, "huh, this is weird, but not to cut them too much slack, they still need to be held accountable and still need to be taking action." But I think a lot of the times it's interesting hearing that from their perspective.

KROVITZ: That's so interesting. Thinking about different sorts of levels, like the international level, federal level, local level, you're involved in several of those levels. How do the methodologies change when you look at different levels of activism?

GOHILL: So when we do LA, I really like to do hyper-local issues. So that's something like the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, that's something super, hyper-local that's going to affect LA residents and that's not going to be a global thing. But there are things in the United States, like when we're targeting Joe Biden to stop Line 3, or internationally to like, call in people at COP 26.<sup>4</sup> Can you repeat the question real quick?

KROVITZ: Just how do methodologies change or tactics change when you're looking at those different levels?

GOHILL: I think the tactics changed because a lot of the time in the United States, I can speak on this a lot more is that law enforcement and governments and overall “vibes” of cities are so different. And so I think when connecting with all these organizers from around the United States, it's all like “how do we change our methods?” So XR Youth US has chapters from New York City and LA but also has chapters from Boise, Idaho and Alabama. Like the entire state, Alabama, is a group. So, when I'm on these calls, we're talking about, “Oh yeah, we're going to block a road in LA. We're going to block this road, we're going to hold it there, we might get arrested, we don't know what's going on.” And then we'll talk to these activists, most of which are black and brown in Alabama, like, “if I do that, I will literally get shot by the KKK.” So I think the idea of civil disobedience and direct action are also different because you really have to take into consideration the issues that local cities face as well. And so I think for methodology, I'm very privileged to be in LA where it's a larger city and you can mess things up a little bit further. But then obviously, the methodology for things are going to change depending on the local group. So I can speak for this as someone who leads the national group, a lot of our national campaigns are able to fit in to every single city. So our current campaign that's happening all of October is to focus on fossil fuel finance, which is going to be a national day of action on Friday, and also having artistic. So it'd be talking about art, talking about oil spills and banner drops and all this stuff. This is stuff

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<sup>4</sup> Line 3 is a proposed pipeline expansion from Alberta, Canada to Superior, Wisconsin. For more information on Line 3 visit this website: <https://www.stopline3.org/#intro>. COP26 is an acronym for the 26th Conference of the Parties, an international climate conference in 2021.

you can do. And here, the idea is to target fossil fuel finance in an anti-capitalist way, and prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, and establish reparations. This is the overarching theme. How this fits in, you get to decide. So we took that as we're going to do this massive artistic climate protest that's Halloween themed that's going to focus on local endangered animals in Los Angeles, that's going to be this Friday. Alabama's going to do a banner drop over one of their highways. Boise canceled action because the shooting, but I think they were going to do another banner drop too. Alabama, is also going to do an oil spill. And so it's like how we can take this overarching theme and fit it into different things. Obviously, here in Los Angeles, when we have a campaign, it's more like, "this is going to be civil disobedience, it's going to be a series of blocking roads, it's going to be a series of tying ourselves to bank headquarters, it's going to be doing this." Internationally, it's going to be like "this is the overarching theme, how you want it to fit into your country, you can do that, too." And so I think the farther you go up, the more broader it gets, because no country or no city is the same.

KROVITZ: Okay, I want to be mindful of your time, I know you have class. Just to finish it out, what advice would you give to people who are looking to get into activism, or who are really passionate, but don't really know what to do with that passion?

GOHILL: I'd say either attend a protest if there is one, or start one. I think the activist community is here that's very supportive. I can speak on XR's point, we have this thing called a "self-driven workload" where you set your own deadlines. And also, it's very lenient. I think the thing is that the youth activist movement, we're all people who are under 22. We all understand what everyone's going through, because we've been there too and we are there. And so a lot of the times people think that activism is this extracurricular and this hobby, this activity that's like, "you have to do it." Like if I sign up for this group, this is my commitment, and if I don't do it I'm kicked out. And I think the thing is we have to stop treating activism like a job, and we have to start treating it like a passion. So come to an organizing call when you can, show up to protest when you're free, make a sign if you can. And so I think having this leniency is there. And I can say this about most other movements as well. It's just contribute what you can, because we're all in this crisis, we need whatever we can to contribute to it. And change only

comes when we demand it. And so if you're one of the people wanting to demand change, get out there, demand it. And there's just so many ways people can fit in. I know people who will contribute by making a poster, or making Instagram graphic, and we'll send it over and that's your contribution. You're helping stop the climate crisis by getting information out there. That poster is going to go out into the streets, someone's going to see it and be like, "I want to go to this." And so I think these little steps that we can take all contribute to this large movement. And so I'd say if you're hesitant, just feel free to get involved. You can DM @XRYouthUS us if you want to get involved in a local group or to start one.

KROVITZ: That's amazing. Okay, anything else you want to add that we haven't touched on, but you want to make sure gets in the archive?

GOHILL: I think I'm good. Anything else you want me to touch on?

KROVITZ: I think this was amazing. Thank you so much for your time, you're incredible. Thank you so much. I will be in touch with the final transcript.

## Index

Artistic Protests.....	4, 10, 11
Bank of America.....	5
Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).....	3, 4, 5, 7
BlackRock.....	5
Biden, Joe.....	9, 10
C40 Cities.....	8
Global Youth and Mayor's Forum.....	8, 9
California Wildfires.....	1, 2
Chumash.....	6
Citibank.....	5
Civil Disobedience.....	8, 10, 11
Climate.....	1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12
Change.....	1, 2, 3, 7
Crisis.....	1, 2, 6, 12
Emergency.....	6
Justice.....	1, 3
Community.....	1, 2, 11
COP 26.....	10
Corporations.....	3, 7, 8
Extinction Rebellion (XR).....	3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12
Chapters.....	4, 10
Demands.....	4, 5, 6, 7, 12
National Coordinator.....	4, 10
Fossil Free Future Day of Action.....	5, 10
Fossil Fuels.....	5, 10, 11
Frontline.....	4, 6
Garcetti, Eric.....	9
Guajajara, Sônia.....	6
Harasick, Richard.....	7
Hollywood.....	6, 7
Impacts of Climate Change.....	1, 2
Indigenous.....	4, 5, 6, 11
Land.....	5, 6
Sovereignty.....	4, 5, 11
International Indigenous Youth Council.....	6
Intersectional.....	3, 4, 5
JP Morgan Chase.....	4, 5
KKK.....	10

## Line

3.....	10
Los Angeles (LA).....	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11
Financial District.....	5
Department of Water and Power (DWP).....	6, 7, 8, 10
Love and Rage.....	7, 8
Meatless Mondays.....	3
Oil Drilling.....	2
Oscars.....	
6	
Person of Color (POC).....	3, 10
Police.....	7
Liaison.....	
7	
Pollution.....	
2	
Protest.....	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11
Racial Justice.....	3, 4
Reparations.....	4, 5, 11
Remediation.....	4, 5
Self-Driven Workload.....	11
Smog.....	2
Tataviam.....	6
The “Future” as the Center of Conversation.....	3, 7
Tongva.....	6
Waititi, Taika.....	6
Wells Fargo.....	5
Youth Advisory Councils.....	5, 8