

# Protesters vow to keep up pressure on Tesla as it expands German gigafactory

Publication Date: 2024-05-17

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Section: Technology

Tags: Tesla, Germany, Elon Musk, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/may/17/protesters-vow-to-keep-up-pressure-on-tesla-as-it-expands-german-gigafactory>



Environmental protesters vowed to keep up the pressure on Tesla after failing to stop plans by Elon Musk's company from expanding its sprawling electric vehicle plant outside Berlin. The town council of Grünheide, guarded by police and plain-clothed security guards, gave the green light on Thursday to the US automaker after a heated, nearly three-hour debate disrupted by heckling and booing from the audience of about 200 people. A scaled-back "compromise" scheme, which still needs the go-ahead from local environmental authorities, allows Tesla to enlarge the manufacturing facility and build new infrastructure to move logistics to rail lines and off local roads. The company intends to double the capacity of the German site to 100 gigawatt hours of battery production and 1m EVs a year in the face of increasing Chinese competition in the European market. The Tesla manager, Alexander Riederer, told the meeting that long term, the company would like to see 2m cars roll off the Grünheide assembly line each year. The gigafactory, the first Tesla operation of its kind in Europe, employs about 12,500 workers. A week before the meeting, activists, who had set up a protest camp in the town where the factory is located, attempted to storm the Tesla premises during a rally of about 800 people, clashing with police. Musk, the Tesla CEO, criticised the response as too lenient on his social media platform X. The demonstrators, led by organisers Disrupt Tesla and supported by groups including Extinction Rebellion, argue that the enlarged site will cause damage to the local environment and threaten drinking water supplies. They also object to the impact on local communities in countries such as Argentina and Bolivia wreaked by lithium mining required to produce electric car batteries. Outside the gymnasium where the council meeting was held, about 50 activists held up banners reading "Water is a human right" and "People over profit". Participants had their bags inspected before entering the hall and security guards confiscated all water bottles. The final vote – 11 in favour, six opposed, two absentions – was met with cries of "traitors!" and "we'll remember!" and stunned silence among the demonstrators who later hugged and wept on the lawn in front of the building. Tesla welcomed the vote, saying it would provide "reliability for planning" while preventing 1,900 lorry trips each day on local roads thanks to the rail option. Esther Kamm, of the Turn Off the Tap on Tesla group, called the outcome a "catastrophe" and said protesters would not back down. "There are still many stages to come where we can cause disruptions and we will call on people to bring their pressure to bear," she said, suggesting civil disobedience as well as legal appeals. "The town can still withdraw its approval or Tesla can say 'we're sick of all this resistance, it's not worth it any more'." However, many residents welcomed the coming expansion as good for the 9,000 people in Grünheide, about 25 miles (40km) south-east of central Berlin. "It frustrates me that the perspective you're hearing here is so local, so not-in-my-back yard," Bernd Rühl, 52, who works in the solar power

sector. Rühl described himself as a former environmental activist and said he named his 20-year-old daughter after Julia 'Butterfly' Hill, who lived in an ancient California redwood tree for two years to keep it from being felled. He said he felt the protesters and local opponents failed to recognise the importance of the "transport transformation" away from Germany's dominant car industry built on combustion engines. "You can say what you want about Elon Musk – he's a polarising figure – but electric cars are the much better alternative if you care about global climate protection." Robert Habeck, Germany's economy minister of the Greens, criticised the Grünheide protests last week, saying that automobile manufacturing would remain a crucial component of Europe's top economy for generations to come. "No one can have an interest in a Germany without car production," he told Funke media group. "We are trying to get the cars of the future built here so that we can keep the jobs and value creation here. Tesla is building those kinds of cars." Many of the protesters and residents said that the council's vote had been "undemocratic" because it ran counter to a non-binding referendum in February. Citizens voted by a 62% majority with a large turnout at that time against Tesla's plans. As a result, the company put forward a more modest scheme including cutting down 47 hectares of pine forest – half of what was originally planned. The protests, however, continued. The production site was shut down for a week in March after suspected arson cut off its power. A separate collective called Volcano group claimed responsibility for the fire, calling for the "complete destruction of the gigafactory".