Press release

START

22.2.24 h19.00

Scientist fired for refusing to take plane back from Papua New Guinea loses appeal to regain his job



Dr. Grimalda at his arrival in Kiel for his legal appeal. Credit: Kieler Nachrichten [1]

Dr. Gianluca Grimalda, a social scientist and climate activist, lost today his appeal at the Labour Court to regain his job after being sacked by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW). Last October, IfW fired Dr. Grimalda for his refusal to travel back home by plane [2]. Dr. Grimalda had spent seven months in Bougainville, an autonomous province of Papua New Guinea, to study the impact of market integration and climate change on social cohesion. His fieldwork was delayed six weeks due to security threats, natural hazards, and logistical constraints. Faced with the injunction to fly back within five days to make up for the delay, Dr. Grimalda preferred tnmo slow-travel back to Europe as he had originally planned [3]. Dr. Grimalda sued the Kiel IfW for unfair dismissal, arguing that there was no reason he could not fulfil his work responsibilities remotely on his journey back to Europe. The judge of the Labour Court in Kiel, Germany, rejected his appeal, on grounds that taking six weeks for slow-travel cannot be acceptable if the employer demands an employee to return immediately to the workplace. The judge had previously rejected Dr Grimalda's lawyer request to adjourn the hearing to present new evidence. The judge proposed the payment of

two months of salary as a compromise solution in the legal case. Dr. Grimalda rejected the compromise, declaring he wanted to enshrine into labour law the impossibility to sack a worker for conscientious objection to flying, thus forcing the judge to make a decision. This is the first known case of an employee losing their job for their refusal to fly.

Dr. Grimalda studied cooperative behaviour and propensity to protect individuals against collective risks in 30 villages from rural areas of the Bougainville archipelago.[4] Starting his journey in mid-October by cargo ship, it took 72 days to travel over 28,000 km and 16 countries by ferry, train, coaches, vans, and trucks.[5] According to his estimate, slow-travel reduced greenhouse gases emissions by 10 times.[6] Greenhouse gases are responsible for increased temperatures and extreme weather events.[7] Dr. Grimalda has been slow–travelling for 15 years to minimise his carbon footprint.

“I am very disappointed with this outcome”, says Dr. Grimalda. “IfW wrote a large amount of untruthful things in their legal response. Those would have been easily falsifiable. In the end, though, they did not matter, because the judge basically said that slow-travel is inadmissible if your employer is not accepting it. The behaviour by IfW belongs to the deep Anthropocene pre-digital era. As ecosystems are dangerously close to “tipping” into irreversible states of disaster, and as the recent COP28 failed once again to phase out fossil fuels, it is all the more important that scientists take extraordinary actions to signal the severity of the crisis. I would do all this again.” Dr. Grimalda does not rule out appealing against this sentence, but says that his lawyer first needs to read its motivations to see if there is a concrete chance of success. It is yet not clear whether Dr. Grimalda will have to pay €9,000 for trial expenses.

Dr. Grimalda has participated in several actions of civil disobedience with Scientist Rebellion in 2022. “It is extraordinary that a research institute dismissed a researcher for doing his job too diligently and for avoiding flying during a climate emergency”, says Julia Steinberger, Professor of Societal Challenges of Climate Change at Lausanne University and lead author in the latest International Panel on Climate Change report. “ Kiel IfW seems mainly to retaliate for Gianluca’s past participation in civil disobedience on climate change with Scientist Rebellion”, she concludes. “It is unusual that someone actually lives as if the truth of climate and environmental breakdown is real. Gianluca does it”, says Dr. Nana-Maria Grüning, Molecular Biologist. “This is remarkable in a society with a high level of denial. Populist politicians criminalise climate activists rather than protecting our life sustaining systems. That the IfW is punishing their employee for just acting in touch with physical reality is a scandal and beyond shameful for a scientific institution.”

More than 9,000 people signed a petition to reinstate Dr. Grimalda in his job.[8]



Dr Grimalda hitch hiking a ride with a truck driver after crossing the Qorma pass at 4,600m between China and Tajikistan. Credit: G. Grimalda

END

Contact:

Dr. Gianluca Grimalda

Email: g.grimalda@gmail.com

Phone: +39 344 180 8380 (Whatsapp + Telegram)

Twitter: @GGrimalda

Mastodon: fediscience.org/@gianluca_grimalda

Bluesky: @ggrimalda.bsky.social

References:

[1] Forscher aus Kiel verweigert Rückflug: Jetzt klagt er gegen Kündigung

[2] Why a climate researcher pushed the limits of low-carbon travel — and his employer's patience (nature.com)

[3] Refusing to fly has lost me my job as a climate researcher. It's a price worth paying | Gianluca Grimalda | The Guardian

[4] https://twitter.com/GGrimalda/status/1670440361226031106 (Blog on the fieldwork in Papua New Guinea)

[5] https://twitter.com/GGrimalda/status/1713473475107836233 (Blog on return journey)

[6] Excel sheets with computations of emissions: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1b5HWD1AymF3A1Pse7knvpViWLxN_yV5RZEj2vHA-ZgM/edit?usp=sharing

[7] Armstrong McKay, D. I., Staal, A., Abrams, J. F., Winkelmann, R., Sakschewski, B., Loriani, S., ... & Lenton, T. M. (2022). Exceeding 1.5 C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points. *Science*, *377*(6611), eabn7950.

[8] https://innn.it/klimaforscher-entlassen

Photos of return journey:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1sGjxLaUObQ4HJy5X7iRrGKSukOD8m5TH?usp=sharing

Itinerary of inbound journey:

