

## Protesters Are Slowly Winning Electronics Right-to-Repair Battles in Europe

Activists brought a busted refrigerator to a protest and successfully agitated for their right to repair.

By [Matthew Gault](#) | Dec 14 2018, 12:00pm

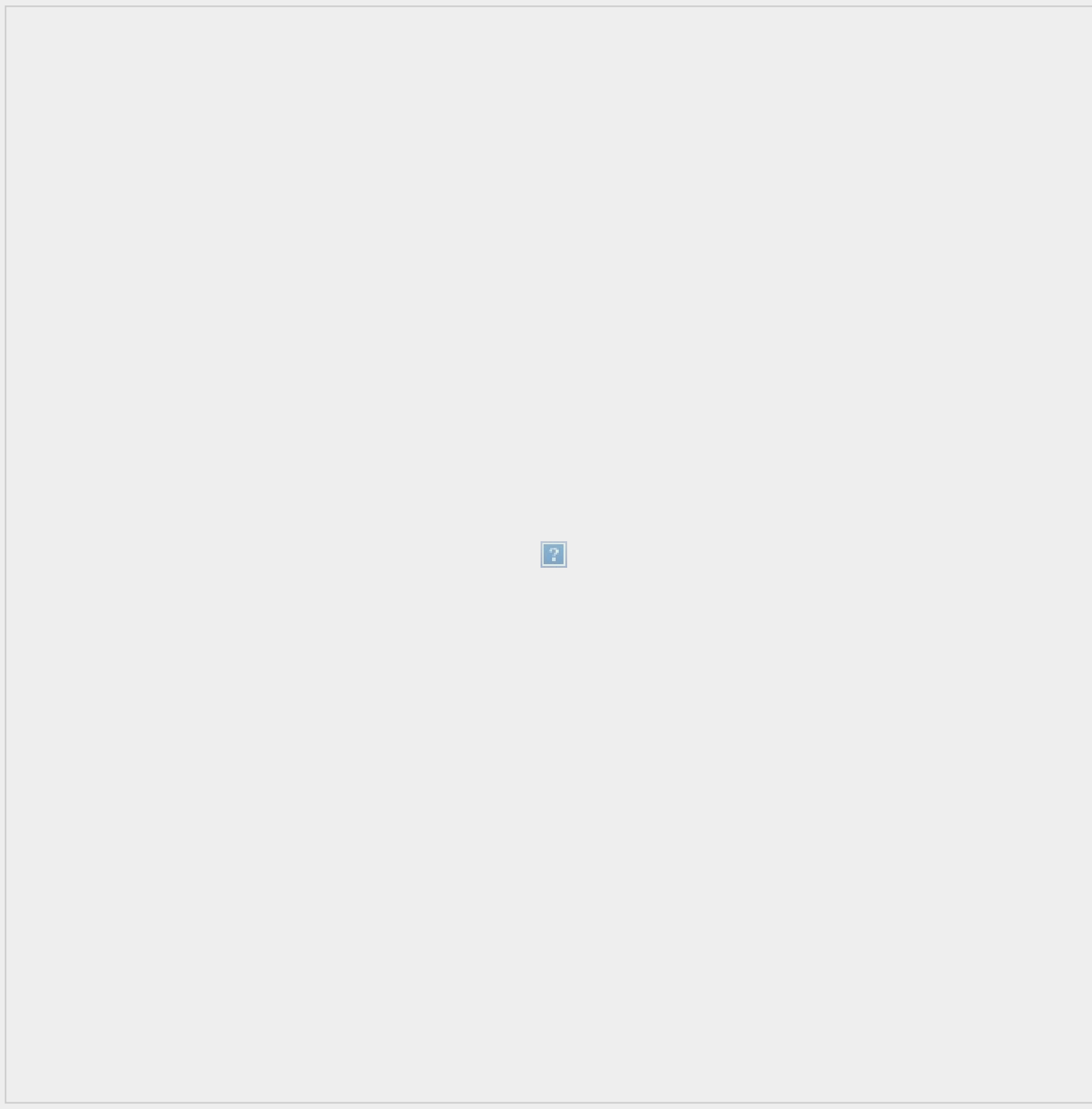


Image: Schraube locker!?

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On Monday, December 10, protestors gathered outside of the Albert Borschette Conference Centre in Brussels. They'd brought an unhappy refrigerator with them. Inside the building, European Union member states had gathered to vote on changes to the EU's [Eco Design and Energy Label Directives](#)—a set of policies and laws governing the safe manufacture of various appliances.

Groups such as Schraube locker!? (Screw Loose in English) and the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) had been working towards this moment—agitating for EU politicians to take the opportunity to enshrine the right-to-repair in European law. It's going to be a long fight. Monday was all about refrigerators.

“They decided, for refrigerators, that spare parts should be available,” Joyce-Ann Syhre, a founding member of Schraube locker!?, told me over Skype. Going forward, manufacturers selling refrigerators in the EU will have to sell consumers the spare parts they need to fix their own machines. They also have to be designed to be repaired with common tools. It's one small step in a long process. Next week will see another vote all about regulations about lights, and in January they'll vote on washing machine regulations.

Schraube locker!? is a German group dedicated to agitating for the right to repair in its home country of Germany. It gathered more than 100,000 signatures on a petition aimed at encouraging German legislators to [vote to enshrine the right-to-repair in EU law](#). Monday's vote was a small but important victory in the fight right-to-repair legislation in Europe. A fight groups such as Schraube locker!? are pioneering.

In Europe, the fight for the right-to-repair is new and legislative wins are often two steps forward and one step back. That's how it was with the refrigerators. “They said the spare parts and information should be mainly there for professional repairers,” Syhre said. “This would mean that all the bottom-up repair initiatives and people at home will still have problems getting information and spare parts.”

European activists are still optimistic.

“This vote is an opportunity to open the floodgates towards developing regulations which set the minimum requirement for repair,” Jean-Pierre Schweitzer, Product Policy and Circular Economy Officer for the European Environmental Bureau—a network of people and groups dedicated to fighting for environmental legislation in Europe—told me over Skype. “There's a greater awareness around issues such as mining of critical materials in conflict zones and electronic waste...but how quickly the changes necessary to right-to-repair are going to happen, I'm not sure.”

Part of the problem is that Western European countries don't have a repair culture. Schweitzer told me that, in general, people in the EU buy new devices when the old ones break down. In Eastern Europe, there's a more robust repair culture that's been making its way west, but slowly. “We have a similar situation to the US now,” he said. “You have repair cafes that started in Amsterdam, the counterculture of repair is being revived in Western Europe.”

The vote on changes to the Eco Design laws were the perfect opportunity for the EEB and other groups to make real political changes. “For the first time, within these proposals, they're including some recommendations about repair...and how to expand the life of these products,” Schweitzer said.

But industry lobbyists have fought against the provisions and, ahead of the vote, draft legislation for the right-to-repair refrigerators looked like it had been written by a lobbyist. “The provisions that were going to support repair have been massively watered down,” Schweitzer said. The laws seemed to encourage recycling rather than repair. Manufacturers wanted people buy new products instead of repairing their own. “There's a big corporate opposition to repair in the EU.”

There's also ground support among activists to fight the lobbyists. Schraube locker!? is a new organization and its focus is concrete political change. Syhre got interested in the right-to-repair after several of her concretes failed once their warranties ended. “You feel very dependent as a consumer but you don't know what's going on,” she said. “Is this planned obsolescence?” The EU has laws against against planned obsolescence, but it varies from country to country and its hard to prove a manufacturer created a product that's designed to fail.

Syhre met two other like-minded women and decided they wanted to attack the problem of planned obsolescence and secure the right-to-repair. “In Germany there are a lot of organizations working on [the right-to-repair],” she said. But most of those groups work on informing consumers and providing resources to facilitate repairs. Nobody was working to change the laws so the women founded Schraube locker!? to do just that.

It was a good year for it because the EU had planned to vote on changes to its Eco Design and Energy Label Directives. “This is a political issue,” she said. Then they started their petition, gathered signatures and submitted it to Germany's Environmental Ministry. The Ministry rejected it. Undeterred, Schraube locker!? tracked the head of the Ministry down at a conference, scheduled a meeting, and got her tacit support of the petition.

Next, Schraube locker!? enlisted 500 supporters to tweet at Germany's Economic Ministry demanding it take a position on the right-to-repair. “The Ministry answered one day afterwards,” Syhre said. Berlin's Economic Ministry told Schraube locker!? it was pro-repair, but only when it made sense. When there were better, more environmentally friendly products available, consumers should purchase those. The politicians, again, encouraged recycling over repair and reuse.

Despite the pushback, Monday's vote was still a win. Going forward, refrigerator manufacturers selling the appliances in Europe will have to make them easier to disassemble. Before, the products were often welded shut or glued together, making it hard to replace parts without destroying the appliance. It's an important first step towards enshrining the right-to-repair in European law, and the first such legislation that will affect the entire EU.

The coming votes on lighting and washing machines will probably follow a similar course, but none of the laws will go into effect until March 2019 when the European Parliament will formally approve the legislation. Syhre, Schraube locker!?, and the EEB aren't waiting around to see what happens. The fight for the right-to-repair is starting with refrigerators and washing machines, but the groups have their sights set on consumer electronics like smartphones and laptops. Refrigerators are just the beginning.

“There will be a bigger right-to-repair campaign next year,” Shrye said. “The EEB, together with iFixit and other organizations are getting ready. There will be more votes after January, further steps at the political level, and they want to run a campaign in parallel...it's important to create a network between all the actors in the different member states to create pressure on the national governments.”



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