

The ZAD Will Survive

DON'T LET GO OF VICTORY...

“There will be no airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes”—we’ve said it so often, a way of demonstrating our stubbornness and of transforming it into a prophecy. On the 17th of January, the statement was scrawled as headlines across an entire country. Today it seems such a simple phrase, but one that signifies an historic event without parallel in the last 40 years: the first major political victory of an entire generation. Our present is so bereft of wins, one would have to go all the way back to the Larzac¹ peasants’ struggle to find

¹ The Larzac struggle involved farmers and post 1968 activist resisting the extension of an existing military base in South Western [France](#). It lasted from 1971 to 1981, and ended in victory when the newly elected President [François Mitterrand](#) abandoned the project.

an equivalent. Yet even this would make a poor comparison, since today's victory was won against a succession of hostile governments, without a single politician ever having subsumed the abandonment of the airport within their own agenda.

Moreover, it was achieved without any excessive pacifism, something journalists haven't failed to emphasize referring to the ZAD's emblematic status as a "lawless" zone, and to its fierce defense (against the attempted evictions) in 2012². It would be a mistake to believe that just stones and barricades made it possible to win. Yet it is their usage that made the decision to abandon the project as inevitable as it was difficult for Macron to swallow. "Ceding the ZAD to the radicals"—was how editorialists reproached the President, obscuring an entire movement of struggle that has battled for half a century, using all forms of resistance, legal and illegal. To avoid humiliation, the State put on a rickety performance: the first act was a mediation, then a slew of meetings with local elected officials, and finally the pantomime of an aborted eviction to make everyone forget all its threats, disavowals, and renunciations and to stifle the "yes" victory of its 2016 referendum³—in short, to forget the scandalous nature of the thrashing it's taken. Despite all this effort, our victory sparkles within the media and political garbage dump. It only had to say two short words: "So there!"

How good these words feel, particularly in an era where everything leads us to believe that it is useless to fight. Their insolence is proportional to the pressure weighing constantly on the bocage⁴ for almost a decade, or

2 In 2012, thanks to the diversity of tactics and mass popular support the government failed to evict the zone despite thousands of gendarmes and more than a month of conflict on the zone. For an english account see:

<https://labofii.wordpress.com/2012/11/13/rural-rebels-and-useless-airports-la-zad-europes-largest-postcapitalist-land-occupation/>

3 In February 2016 without any warning the President announces that a local referendum will take place in June. What is largely seen as a 'fundamentally biased' consultation, results in a wins by 55% in favour of the airport.

4 A little used term in English, a 'bocage' is a landscape that merges agriculture, in the form of grazing pastures and more 'natural' landscapes of forest and thick hedgerows

within the demonstrations in cities across France. On the 17th of January, the messages we received from all across Europe testified to the ZAD's emblematic character, a function of its longevity and consistency, it's capacity to aggregate and audacity. But what touched us even more were the accolades from the elders seated inside the barn at La Vacherit, those who had won their struggles against the Nuclear Power stations projects at Pellerin, Carnet, and Plogoff,⁵ and who toasted to the return of the healthy climate of fear in the minds of the powerful, those who are once again concerned about not being able to spread their megaprojects across this country.

...ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

However, it isn't simple to win. Particularly when we consider that, with a virtually unanimous lust for revenge, journalists, elected officials and entrepreneurs all agree that if the State was to abandon this airport project, it must at the very least get rid of the "Zadists" in the process. The task consists in applying whatever pressure they can, in the hopes of isolating the illegal occupants from their neighborly comrades, be they farmers, naturalists or unionists. It began with the Prefecture (the local ministry of interior) putting pressure on us to dismantle everything obstructing the D281 road, under threat of an immediate police intervention the scope of which was deliberately left hazy. Police checkpoints were set up nearby, with gendarmes stopping vehicles in villages adjoining the ZAD. This injunction had something comical about it, given that it came from the same Police Department that had closed the road in 2013, only to find it swiftly reopened by the movement. But this road wasn't simply a road, it was a symbol. It is charged with our history, with its poetic chaotic chicanes⁶, its drawings carved into the roads surface, the brambles reclaiming the tarmac,

enclosing a mosaic of small fields.

5 This region is the only one in France with no Nuclear power stations, thanks to popular resistance in the 70s and 80s.

6 Half barricades that force cars to take a double-bend to slow down.

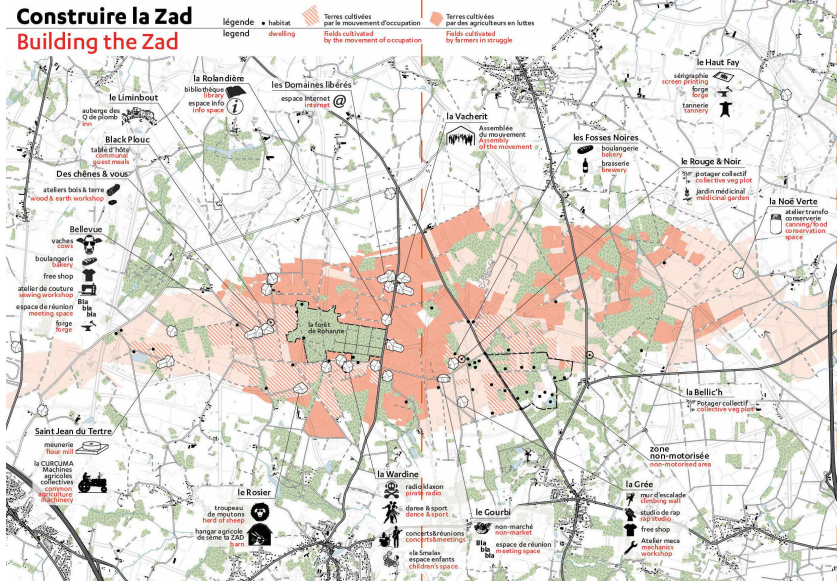
its improbable uses and the disagreements it periodically produced between us. For even if it was open to traffic, it wasn't always easy to navigate, particularly for the farmers who sometimes struggled to get their agricultural vehicles through. It also generated a degree of anxiety and resentment on the part of some locals, due to the occasionally hostile behavior of those defending the barricades, and many eventually resigned themselves to no longer using it. Once the airport abandonment was announced, it became impossible to continue to forcibly defend the chicanes. Moreover, the villagers had decided in favor of its total reopening, with a large part of the movement deeming the gesture necessary to be in a position to maintain a fight for the future of the ZAD. So the State tried to play on this point of discord to avoid losing face. Many of us felt that if we didn't reopen the road, the promised intervention was likely. It would have offered the government the narrative it had dreamt of: the infamous "50 radicals" that the media were having a field day with, on the barricades, refusing to engage with the issue and cut off from the rest of the movement.

It could have served as an ideal pretext for arrests or evictions of some of the dwellings. In the days following the announcement of the abandonment, the clearing of the D281 would become the focal point around which one of two possibilities was going to play out: either the final breakup of the movement, or the possibility of seeing it grow and continue beyond the 17th of January. Should one risk losing everything--the experiment of the ZAD, being united in defense of our squatted land, a common future with the other components of the movement⁷ -- for the sake of a symbol? It was decided in an assembly that, no, we could not, yet without really reaching consensus. Some people took the decision really badly, and it involved long discussions, often turning to outright shouting

⁷ We call the richly diverse ecology of the movement a Composition. From the French verb "*composer*," which can mean to arrange, to constitute, or to compose in the case of music. Here, the *composants*, literally "components," are those who *take part* in the most partisan sense of the phrase. We've rendered it variously as "elements" or "participants" of the movement.

matches, to finally dismantle the two cabins that stood in the roadway. One is being reconstructed in a field bordering the D281; but the tensions around the road and resurfacing work remain.

However, what mattered for the immediate future was that this dismantling was an occasion to renew the portentous promise made by all: if we find ourselves again in imminent danger of eviction, everyone commits to showing up and re-barricading all the roads into the ZAD, and as often as necessary. This is how the movement responds shrewdly to both its internal dissensus and to power, for which, in turn, the D281 can serve as a symbol for declaring a “return to law and order.” A false symbol, since the zone remains occupied, but a sufficient lure in order for the State to accept entering into negotiations over the future of the site. As far as we are concerned, this difficult episode nonetheless further proves the will of folks who are not themselves occupants of the ZAD to commit to continuing with us after the abandonment. It was by no means a certainty, given that for some the original objective of the struggle has now been achieved, and even less so when human relations become so tense. But the continued presence of these comrades indicates, more than ever, the desire for a common future. This seemingly improbable desire has taken shape over years of shared dangers and difficulties, of building and planting things together, of sharing feasts and partying. So many sensitive experiences, all of which have turned the ready-made politics of all the movements participants upside down and pushed them to overcome their comfort zones and boundaries. So many ways that show our refusal to simply resign ourselves to a return to normality. Nevertheless, the desire to continue the struggle beyond the airport must not be taken for granted. It involves a very delicate balance that we must tend to and this is what will now drive the struggle.



GOING FOR THE LAND

Although we are not used to winning, we weren't at all caught short by our victory against the airport. A few years ago we had a fundamental intuition: victory is something that is constructed. This conviction was set in motion at the end of Operation Cesar⁸, and embodied a rupture. We didn't have to make up what we wanted to pull off as went along, because the text “Six Points for the Future of the ZAD”⁹ declared it as early as 2015. It was a fundamental shift: from a struggle against a megaproject, we were slowly moving towards a struggle to sustain and amplify what we had built on this land through resisting, and since the 17th of January, this is the common horizon that we share.

8 The name given by the police for their first eviction operation, which failed. A reference to the fact that we are in Brittany, the land of Asterix !

9 For the six points see: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3569-six-points-for-the-future-of-the-zad>

To get there, from now on, the fact that it has been admitted that we were right, means that we can use this legitimacy. This has a number of consequences. For example, the unconditional defense of an amnesty for all the anti-airport movement's resisters. But also, and above all, a simple principle: those who enabled this territory not to be destroyed are likewise in the best position to take charge of it.

The end of the Declaration of Public Utility on the 9th of February turns the status of the ZAD's lands on its head. Out of the 4077 acres earmarked for the airport, 1111 have been cultivated for a long time by resisting farmers intending to recover their rights, whilst the movement wrenched 667 acres from the management of the Chamber of Agriculture to carry on collective agricultural experiments. 1309 acres of land are temporarily redistributed to farmers who signed an amicable agreement with Vinci¹⁰. As such, they had been financially compensated and obtained plots of land outside of the zone. Yet they continue to exploit and collect the Common Agricultural Policy on the lands they ceded to Vinci on the zone, thereby having their cake and eating it. The most greedy may, from now on, claim priority on future leases and take advantage of the hard fought over land preserved by the movement to enlarge their farms. Moreover, the former owners who were part of the struggle and who refused any agreement with Vinci will be able to recover their expropriated properties and choose to give it over to conventional use or to a more collective use by bringing them into a common property entity. The battle for the land will therefore be at the heart of this struggle for the months and years to come.

The burning challenge now is our ability to collectively manage as much of the land as possible, without the movement splitting apart. If the territory of the ZAD becomes too fragmented, it will sap the common force that simmers here, leaving only scattered individuals or groups, each pursuing their own objectives. It's not hard to imagine that the most isolated could end up evicted, and that others would be forced to, bit by bit, return

10 The Multinational Corporation who were to build and run Nantes new airport.

to the economic frameworks that the ZAD has so successfully managed break apart. A large portion of the land could return to productivist forms of agriculture with little concern for the harmonious balance discovered here between our human activities and the care of the bocage. And of course it would be the conventional agricultural institutions that would take back control of them. That is why from this spring onward, we will have to continue to occupy new plots and install projects on them which fight against the greed of the “cumulards”¹¹ and the arrogance of those in power who have threatened to evict our living spaces after the 1st of April.

This is why we aim to bring together all the land of the ZAD into an entity that issues from the movement of struggle. The decision to give it a legal form was the culmination of discussions between the various elements of the movement and the assembly. It was the choice that allowed us, all together, to reconcile each other’s objectives, and thereby maintain some bargaining power for the future. This entity would aim to encompass the swarming abundance which characterises the ZAD, in order to maintain its richness, and be a mantle under which its can continue to go beyond its margins of invention and freedom. It would only be a structure, and one that was of course the most coherent as possible with our desires. Now and as always, the key will still in the way we inhabit, both this structure and within this territory.

This choice to head towards a legal base was counterintuitive for many people here, challenging many of the occupants deeply held political convictions. It forced us to seriously ask ourselves what do we really hold dear. What will allow us to sustain all our activities and living spaces in the future? We are fairly certain that these complex questions won’t be resolved by mistrustful tirades about the alleged treason of this or that person, nor by a radical fatalism about the sanitized future to come. Neither can we be content with self-fulfilling prophecies that tell us that ‘all experimental

11“Double-dippers.” In this instance, those who have ceded their lands to Vinci for a profit and then try to collect more money on other lands saved by the movement.

communes end up crushed or reintegrated into society.’ To the contrary, we think that in this moment of dramatic change, it is a matter of recognising what will best allow us to remain faithful to the promises about the future we’ve made to each other every step of the way. The gamble we’re engaged in is a long way from being won. It requires an unprecedented level of trust between us, between the various components of the movement, between everyone involved. It requires trust in our goals, our practices, and in the respect we hold for one another. Such trust is a rare thing nowadays.

We’re well aware that any legalization obviously carries risks of normalization. However, what we are considering takes the opposite path: to create precedents that continue to push the threshold of what institutions can accept, in the hope that these wedges driven into the rigidity of French law serve many more beyond us in the future.

It is because we accept this hypothesis that we’ve decided to go ahead and defend our vision of the future of the ZAD in the face of the State, through a joint delegation comprised of all the elements of the movement. This is far preferable to allowing separate negotiations, which could end up pushing those who attend to defend singular and, at times, divisive interests. The delegation would be the expression of the assemblies of the movement, who would continue, in parallel fashion, to carry out whatever actions necessary to secure all that the negotiations cannot get us.

ASSEMBLED USES

The wood burner made out of an old hot water tank fails to warm the air in the Wardine's main hall ¹². A hundred people begin to settle into the space, some on sofas, others on benches. Behind the circle - come - oval, the spray painted murals makes it feel more like a punk concert than an assembly. It's a small but colorful crowd of diverse ages, dress and lifestyles. A farmer speaks. Her farm is about thirty kilometers away from the ZAD.

¹²One of the large farmhouses on the ZAD used for meetings and concerts.

However, when she speaks of the zone's 4077 acres, one would think she was born here and that she intended to finish out her life here. Such is the way she speaks of this place, so precious to her. .

It is often said “the land belongs to those who live on it”, a way of signaling our rupture with the technocratic whims of the State. But it’s more than that in this case. It belongs to a movement, not through ownership, but via struggle.

And since the decision to abandon the airport was announced, the assembly hall is always full, filled by those who form the heart (not legal, but real) of the entity that we desire, and which will fight so that the forms of life that we have built here last and deepen. Forms of life that depend of ways of sharing that, to say the least, are not the norm.

If there exists a place where the ownership of capital is not a source of pride and valorization, it is surely this zone. Many things are free here; you can use tractors, tools or books without ever reaching for your wallet. This doesn’t mean that, like anywhere else, there isn’t any money circulating. But it's the use made of it and its symbolism, that differs: we would want that paying for something is not an easy reimbursement for a lack of involvement in common life, a way of exempting oneself. If there is little money here, there is however a fierce daily fight against the economic logic that wants to measure the value of every gesture. Instead, we are trying to replace it with our bonds, our attachments, our trust in each other, and a certain sense of commitment. Scrupulous reciprocity is not required because exchanges are not thought of exclusively at an individual scale, but at the level of the whole territory. If the baker gives a loaf to someone who’s part of the ZAD’s social rap project, he doesn’t calculate how many verses his flour is worth. No accounting for services rendered has ever been written down. Obviously, nothing guarantees us that everyone is playing the game; it’s both a gamble and a question of balance. The care we bring to the quality of our relationships, our insistence on maintaining common perspectives, this is what wards off the economy, not banishing every last euro...

This is how we approach production, as well as space: the meadows, the forests, the bakeries, the workshops ...all as commons. This isn't to say that everything belongs equally to everyone. Those who have built things, who maintain or regularly uses spaces, who plan on staying here for many years, obviously they don't have the same weight when deciding what will happen here. Use serves to prevent chaos from taking the place of ownership. At the same time, the movement deploys its inventiveness to ensure that the needs of newcomers trying to get involved are addressed. The battle ensuing today is not only a fight for the land, but above all for a way of living in common, which gives a whole new meaning to the idea of work or activity. And in so doing it far exceeds the 4077 acres of the ZAD.



TOMORROW ISN'T FAR OFF

A few months ago, while passing along the Suez path¹³, one could hear songs ringing out in Basque, Breton, Italian, Occitan, Polish, and even sometimes in French. They emanated from the site of the Ambazada, a new building destined to become the ZAD's embassy for struggles and peoples from around the world. The idea had its origins in the Basque support committee, who organized several "brigades" to come and participate in the building's construction alongside occupants of the ZAD. Groups will be able to spend several days or weeks there, talk about their struggles, and get organized with us whilst having a drink at the bar. In this way, we will be able to deepen the coordination across the various territorial struggles that have formed over the past years, making us stronger, more numerous, and better organized wherever a development project threatens our lands.

These last weeks, we've heard a lot of talk of the 'pacification of the ZAD', and of its future as an 'alternative agricultural zone'. It no longer makes sense to struggle anymore, they say, since the airport has been canceled. Others say that Notre-Dame-des-Landes could become a base of material support for other struggles, since the front line no longer exists. For our part, we prefer not to oppose front and base, as the two are intimately related here. It is the combination of the combative traditions of the local farmers with the foundation provided by the ZAD that enable a significant yield to be produced and taken to Nantes to feed the picket lines. It is this same cross-fertilization that will bring its energy to the forests of Bure¹⁴, to the free neighbourhood of the Lentillères¹⁵, to the hills of Roybon¹⁶ or the cause¹⁷ of Saint-Victor. In the same vein, the material force of the ZAD

13 One of the country lanes that cuts across the zone

14 Where a struggle against the construction of Frances main nuclear dump is taking place.

15 Squatted market gardens in Dijon resisting development.

16 Occupied forest against the building of a Centre Parks leisure centre.

17 An Occitan word meaning limestone plateau, which are common in south-central France and where a giant transformer for industrial wind farms is being resisted.

(carpentry workshop, flour mill, forges, cannery, pirate radio, marquees, sound systems, seeds and bulldozers...) is constituted and growing thanks to the support of the farmers and workers engaged in struggle. You cannot untangle it all and so much the better. Holding onto and densifying these bonds shelters us from either a pacified agricultural future or a radical marginalised zone. It is and always will be the flows and exchanges that prevents the ZAD from closing in on itself. The more it lives, always welcoming, curious and adventurous, the more the reality of its territory spreads beyond its perimeter.

Beneath the eaves of the barn of the future¹⁸, as night falls, we prepare the *zbeulinette*, a kind of convertible caravan containing a thousand and one wooden storage compartments, that fold out and becomes our new vehicle for our presence in the struggles in the city of Nantes. Laden with food, drink, music and books, it erupts into the middle of Nantes' Haussmannian boulevards. It is not a caravan of support, for we are intrinsically caught up in most of the struggles it supplies. Tomorrow, it will spread its wings at the university. It is dawn, we are in the car park, groups of folk pile up the materials needed for building barricades: a lecture hall and the rector's castle¹⁹ are occupied by students and undocumented migrant minors.

We deploy our trailer, its tables and sound system. The ten crepe hotplates it was hiding begin to smoke in the icy air. The buckwheat crepes of the ZAD are notorious since the movement against the labour laws.²⁰ Young people quickly gather round, commenting on the the crepe-makers dexterity. Do they know what it took to transform this flour into crepes? Repairing the agricultural machines, the common work days in the fields,

18 Built by 80 traditional carpenters in the summer of 2016, this majestic barn is becoming the central wood workshop with saw mill, cabinet making tools etc.

19 An ancient castle on the grounds of the university that was the old rectory and was squatted to house undocumented minors.

20 In May 2017 a vast movement against new labour laws shook France, with mass strikes, riots and the 'nuit debout' assemblies.

harvesting, milling - It doesn't really matter, what's important is that hunger is satisfied, that the warmth soaks into their bodies.

Nowhere else in the country is there a place quite like the ZAD, somewhere that gathers so many material capacities oriented towards struggle. It is the heart of a real material circulation but also that of ideas and imaginings, and of the craziest projections. The temporal and material foundations that are so lacking in our struggles could take root in the next few months and take the thousands of activities that exist on the ZAD to a whole new level, allowing these projections to be concretized. To construct a workers' hamlet with our unionist comrades (respecting the architectural style of the ZAD!), to make the existing residents both more welcoming and more wild, to graft orchards into all of the hedges of the bocage, to set up a health center, to launch a learning herd as a school for livestock farming, to build a home for the elders, to grow the library, to install Turkish baths, to bring lands outside of the ZAD into its framework, to expand the supply network for struggles regionally and even nationally, to get hold of a printing press... These few thousand acres inspire a long list of desires within us. It's also open to yours: the plots of land we will occupy in the spring are awaiting projects, agricultural and otherwise.

It is difficult to foresee all the upheavals that the airport's abandonment will bring about. A season has just come to a close, without another having begun. These times to come must be grasped, constructed and invented, and we will shape these metamorphoses with our dreams.

Meet us here from the 31st of March in case of an eviction threat, and in the Spring to plan the future of our new lands!

By the residents of *le Moulin de Robanne, la Rolandière, les 100 noms, la Hulotte, Saint-Jean du Tertre, les Fosses noires, la Baraka* and *Nantes brought together in the CMDO (Conseil Pour le Maintien des Occupations)*.