

Struggle against fracking in France - Global frackdown on fracking companies: 22 September

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In January 2011, the Board of Attac France decided that mobilization against shale gas, shale oil and fracking, and more broadly against the logic of extractivism, would be one of its five major priorities for the year. Attac France decided to be involved in this struggle because we think this grassroots mobilization is really powerful and capable of changing the balance of power in our country, and worldwide, to eventually implant new ways of thinking and new patterns of production and consumption

A silent global shale gas (and shale oil) revolution has been underway since 2001, mainly in North America. Although Europe accounts for only 5% of global estimated reserves of shale gas, Europe has sparked the interest of oil and gas companies, after United States and Canada, and before China and other countries. Many European states have granted exploration permits thinking that their country could be part of this new unconventional oil and gas Eldorado. In Europe, Polish shale gas deposits could contain 5.3 trillion cubic meters in all, according to the US department of energy [1]. France is the second European country for its potential for shale gas development. But the plans of the gas companies have not panned out as planned. Polish shale gas deposits are much smaller than estimated [2] and some drilling projects have already been abandoned [3]. Moreover, in July 2011, France became the first country in the world to ban fracking, the dangerous drilling technique used to extract gas and oil from shale, followed shortly after by Bulgaria, in January 2012. Here is a brief X-ray shot, deliberately not exhaustive, of the French battle between the pro-fracking companies and lobbies and the huge citizens' movement fighting against fracking.

Citizens uprising to frack down the fracking method

In the autumn of 2010, very few people in France were aware of what some call "the shale gas revolution". A little over a year later, few French people can claim to have never heard of it. In March 2010, Le Monde announced that the government of Nicolas Sarkozy had delivered three exploration licenses for "liquid or gaseous hydrocarbons" exploration in the South of France to the companies Total (the Montelimar permit) and Schuepbach (Villeneuve de Berg and Nant permits). Located in a region devoid of conventional gas and conventional oil, these permits have been called "shale gas permits" while French law only recognizes permits for "liquid or gaseous hydrocarbons" exploration. At the time and until late fall 2010, very few articles had been published on the subject

and only a few whistleblowers have tried to alert citizens, associations, politicians, etc.

It was not until late 2010 – early 2011 that a huge citizens' movement against shale gas /oil and against fracking began to form in France. Up till the demonstration of more than 15,000 people in Villeneuve de Berg [4] in February 2011, which sounded the first warning shot of the resistance to come, mobilization had mainly consisted of the formation of small citizens' groups who organized public meetings and published informational materials. Yet soon, the town-hall meetings in impacted communities were packed to overflowing, and very often, there were more participants in these meetings than inhabitants in the villages, especially in Ardèche, Gard, Aveyron, etc. Conceded without any public debate or real environmental investigation on the effects of the techniques used, the three permits have worried local communities beyond environmentalists: hunters, anglers, cavers and "ordinary citizens" were part of this first alert phase.

The film *Gasland* by Josh Fox [5], explaining the implications of fracking in various regions of the United States, has been aired thousands of times in long, short or modified versions. As elsewhere, the sincere and powerful images of this film have generated deep emotions and a desire not to let fracking and shale gas extraction happen in local regions. The scene in the film where landowner Mike Markham ignites gas from a well water faucet in his home with a cigarette lighter due to natural gas exploration in the area is a far more effective argument against fracking than any report or speech.

The economic, technical and geological facts of the debate were disseminated and knowledge spread at an incredible speed, in a process similar to that around the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) in 2005. Today, many activists have become unparalleled experts on extraction technologies, despite the lack of any background or training in that area. They know by heart all the arguments from scientific studies explaining the consequences of the exploitation of shale gas. As many examples indicate in the United States, Canada, England and elsewhere, the exploitation of shale gas has led to countless cases of chemical and toxic pollution, health consequences for the populations, the wasting of drinking water, destroying lands, earthquakes, and major greenhouse gas emissions.

As the three licenses already mentioned are located in areas with water scarcity, two of the main critiques against these projects related to the use of water and water pollution. Fracking uses large amounts of compressed water, sand and chemicals to free natural gas from its geophysical reservoirs. Fracking can also cause the contamination of surface and groundwater (including drinking water) with toxic chemicals used in fracking fluids, and increasing the concentration in such water of methane and hazardous and radioactive materials that naturally occur in shale. Because vast quantities of fresh water are required in fracking operations, fracking involves pumping vast amounts of freshwater underground, much of which becomes irretrievable and / or contaminated.

First law in the world that prohibits fracking

The very broad initial alliances build in France have forced many politicians from all sides, and from both the local and the national levels, to take very clear positions against fracking and shale gas, without waiting for instructions or decisions from their various Parisian headquarters. These positions taken by local elected officials have often been transformed into pledges by local authorities. The Parisian establishment, both in government and in business, was surprised and overwhelmed. They proved incapable of countering the surging movement and its demands. When ministers began to call for a pause or moratorium on the issuance of permits, the local groups,

assembled in their National Coordinating Council, were already demanding the cancellation of all existing permits.

While improving their knowledge on the subject and discovering the intricacies of mining legislation, local groups soon came to understand that there were not three permits but 64 permits for “liquid or gaseous hydrocarbons” exploration, many of them located in the Paris region, to explore and extract shale oil, and held by companies such as Vermilion and Treador. Unable to counter the immediate demands of the movement, the ministers and the government came up with misleading statements (such as “French-style fracking”), or resorted to rhetorical dodges (a “moratorium” that wasn’t a true one), in an effort to avoid addressing the actual situation.

For their part, the members of parliament, caught short by a debate they had not seen coming and didn’t have a handle on, ended up submitting four different bills to the Parliament. Once these had gone through the legislative mill, the proposal that came out was considerably watered down, compared to the expectations and demands of the movement (Law of July 13, 2011). Although hydraulic fracking has been banned, it has not been precisely defined, which gives free rein to new interpretations and formulations. The law leaves open the possibility for experimentation under the guise of scientific research and improvement of knowledge. This misuse of science is a breach into which research labs and companies tied to the oil and gas industries will move. Although many permits should have fallen victim to this law and been cancelled, only three [6] – in the regions with the greatest mobilization – had been definitely canceled by early October 2011.

If the configuration of forces was sufficient to result in the cancellation of these three permits, that was in part due to the fact that the citizens’ mobilizations were complemented by legal action challenging the methods of licensing, or their legal grounds, etc. Often scattered, and uncoordinated, or even at cross purposes, some of these legal actions have clearly contributed to the cancellation of the three permits, with the combined files being far too consistent for the government to take the risk of upholding the permits. This legal work continues with regard to the remaining permits, particularly oriented towards obtaining all necessary information in order to have a comprehensive map of the existing permits and their weaknesses.

Towards an energy transition? Which one and with whom?

Of course, many people were initially mobilized to protect their own territory. Not as a NIMBY- “not in my backyard” approach – but in a way that questions sovereignty over the local territory and land use planning. Such an approach amounts to re-politicizing spatial planning by formulating an alternative that inextricably mixes together the local and the global, the territorial and what we could call, from a French perspective, the universal, or “the commons”. The French movement against shale gas and oil fracking has included an international dimension from the outset. First, because the principal mobilizing tool, the film *Gasland*, was shot in the US. But also because the mobilizations in Quebec, which achieved a semi-moratorium, were used as a point of reference. A common language made it easy for French people and French local groups to read news coming from Quebec and to forge links with local Quebec groups. Soon, the slogan “Neither here nor elsewhere” became widespread. Following the achievement of the law banning fracking, interest in learning more about the situation in other countries has steadily increased. Many links have been forged, initially interpersonal ones, then some group twinning, especially between French and Quebecois groups has emerged. Now, a new step has been initiated: structuring these links and the building of a European, or even an international coordination, of the grassroots movements. After the meetings we organized in Marseilles (France) during the Alternative World Water Forum FAME (march 2012) and in Rio (Brazil) during the People’s summit (June 2012), each with participants

coming from several countries, the next step is the Global Frackdown day that will be held on the 22nd of September.

The fact that this movement is not only locally rooted in defending local territories was crucial to broaden the mobilization towards the necessary energy transition we need. But this step was neither easy nor obvious. This broadening of the debate, which shifted many lines of demarcation, has given rise to two main different political orientations. One line that remains focused more narrowly on shale gas and shale oil fracking, deepening the mobilization and anchoring it more deeply through dissemination, education, strengthening of groups, and extension of the territorial presence, etc. Another focused more on proactive work to broaden the mobilization to support global energy issues. Between deepening and broadening, as everyone knows, problems, as well as tensions, may arise. These problems and tensions were aggravated by the lack of time for debate. With a mobilization which quickly grew to major size and got results quickly, it was extremely difficult to take time to organize work and debate between and within the groups, and between the groups and the national organizations.

Very soon, the idea of organizing a big rally in the summer of 2011 was discussed. Initially seen as a show of force – a huge anti-fracking Larzac [7] – the initiative was abandoned in part because of practical difficulties, such as lack of time and materials, venue problems, etc., and political problems, such as what form it should take once the law prohibiting fracking had been passed. The idea of such a gathering was taken up by other local groups who had offered to host the Lezan meeting on “energy transition”, in which ATTAC France, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and others were all involved. Some of the groups, the Ardèche [8] coordination group, for example, did not wish to join this initiative, since they considered the issue too broad with respect to the goals of the shale gas mobilisation. On the other hand, the promoters of this meeting wanted to encompass the entire range of energy issues, even at the risk that, after Lezan, a slower and more reduced process of “convergence” would result [9].

But in the end, the Lezan meeting was really key to mix several issues with anti-fracking debates such as with climate issues for example. Many French people present there have discovered the Cochabamba declaration [10] on climate change and the rights of Mother Earth at that time. Linking fracking with climate requires us to define what we want as an energy transition. In order to limit global warming below 1,5 degrees Celsius, and thereby prevent dangerous climate change, fossil fuels must be phased out as quickly as possible. Energy sobriety, energy savings, renewable energies and a significant reduction of CO₂ emissions will provide the only viable path to an environmentally sustainable and healthy future. The Lezan declaration proposes to engage an energy transition without delay, implying moving towards sobriety and efficiency, stopping the race for fossil fuels and immediate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions up to the requirements stipulated in the Cochabamba people’s agreement. Exploiting unconventional fossil fuels such as shale gas, shale oil and coal bed methane will increase total greenhouse gas emissions and consequently global warming.

One year later, the tension between broadening and deepening is still in evidence, but it is being overcome, for faced with reality, everyone is gradually realizing that broadening and deepening can only be carried out in conjunction. After a year and a half of mobilization against shale gas and oil fracking, it is necessary to broaden the issue. Because a better understanding of technology and industry practices involves expanding the focus from “shale gas and oil fracking” to include such issues as deep offshore drilling in the Bay of Marseille (Mediterranean Sea) or in French Guyana. But also because when opposing dirty energy sources, the energy debate is structured in such a way that it is necessary to be able to present an alternative, both technologically, where the limits are quickly visible, and politically, with a view towards the energy transition, and the transformation of society. On the other hand, it is gradually becoming clear that enlargement can only work provided

if it is carried out by the majority and, especially, by strengthening the foundations of the movement and its local roots. Especially because the battle is not over and the oil and gas lobbies will surely come charging back.

Current challenges: fracking down the oil and gas lobbies to implement a citizens energy transition

The corporations, such as Total, have not abandoned their struggle, or the permits they had or still have. They are stepping up their initiatives and communications operations to regain political momentum, backed by some very helpful experts and media pundits. Pro-fracking articles are flooding the media. *Le Monde*, one of the most famous French newspapers, even dared to publish a report on shale gas exploitation in Texas based on a press trip organized by Total [11], after publishing two editorials asking to reopen the debate on shale gas by insinuating that they could facilitate French energy independence. UFIP, the organization that represents all the oil activities carried out in the French metropolitan territory is suddenly being invited to appear on television and radio shows. And at the same time the new Leftist government hesitates. Hollande has reiterated his opposition to fracking while still leaving the door open for extraction by other methods and possible scientific experiments. What are the tactics pursued by the lobbies and the oil and gas companies? Reopen the debate, insinuate doubt, while using the weaknesses of the existing law to obtain permission to drill and carry out experimental exploration. This could be termed the strategy of “fait accompli”.

The wording of the law that does not define what is fracking along with the ambivalence of the French administration has thus laid the ground for the next showdown. Many companies are not saying they will use fracking, but only that they will stimulate the bedrock or other circumlocutions, so permits that should have been canceled because of the law are still pending. On the other hand, the French administration published in March 2012 a report recommending to evaluate “shale gas” resources in France and to develop scientific tests using fracking to improve techniques. They want to drill and circumvent the law under the pretext of scientific research. While many independent studies in the United States would be sufficient to show the problems caused by the exploitation of shale gas.

Faced with this public relations strategy of oil and gas lobbies, citizen mobilization persists and develops where it was least expected. As there are a large number of exploration and drilling permits still valid, but less publicized than the three mentioned above, some of them have given rise to new citizen protests in 2012, near the French Riviera (departments of Var, Bouches-du-Rhône), and the departments of Savoy, etc. For example, every village in Var affected by the Brignoles permit, has its own citizens’ group and this is the largest citizen’s mobilization seen in the history of this department, usually to the right of the political spectrum. They logged their first victory when former President Sarkozy decided not to extend the Noble Energy permit for prospection at a layer of gas less than 50 km away from beaches that accommodate millions of bathers, and from the valuable nature reserve the Camargues. Thousands of people who planned to demonstrate against the permit renewal on April 8 celebrated this small victory, which has yet to be confirmed [12].

More recently, a license held by Shell, Total and Tullow Oil to explore oil deep offshore off the coast of Guyana has sparked controversy. The new Socialist government has dithered, blocking drilling before changing its mind under pressure from the oil lobby to authorize them. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister’s shuffling of the minister of environment is being seen as a clear signal to facilitate the operations of oil and gas companies. These new debates could be a stepping stone to move from the singular issue of fracking – proven to be too dangerous and already banned – towards a broader

campaign to 'leave the gas and oil in the soil'. Probably a few steps in between will be needed, such as getting an international or a European moratorium on shale gas and shale oil extractions, maybe banning fracking worldwide and banning off-shore drilling in fragile places, no matter which technique is used.

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P.S.

* "Global frackdown on fracking companies: 22 September". Posted on September 3rd, 2012:
<http://www.ejolt.org/2012/09/global-frackdown-on-fracking-companies/>

* This article is a preview of the contents of the upcoming EJOLT report#6 featuring initiatives around the world to leave the oil in the soil and the gas under the grass, to be released in November 2012.

Here is the global website for the 22nd of September Global Day of Action:

<http://www.globalfrackdown.org/>

Here is a map with all the actions planned all over the world:

http://action.foodandwaterwatch.org/p/salsa/event/common/public/search.sjs?distributed_event_KEY=682

Footnotes

[1] Report of the US department of energy :

<http://www.eia.gov/analysis/studies/worldshalegas/pdf/fullreport.pdf>

[2] According to the Polish National Institute of energy, exploitable deposits do not exceed 346 to 768 million cubic meters, 7 to 15 times less than expected initially.

[3] ExxonMobil ends shale gas tests in Poland,

<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/5e883fdc-b94c-11e1-b4d6-00144feabdc0.html#axzz21Zr373dp>

[4] <http://www.bastamag.net/article1451.html>

[5] <http://www.gaslandthemovie.com/>

[6] The permits delivered to Total and Schuepbach

[7] A place well known for many years of struggling against a military camp.

[8] French department which has experienced one of the largest mobilizations.

[9] Here is the final statement of this meeting available on ESSF (article 36082), [Déclaration de](#)

[Lézan \(Gard\) pour une transition énergétique](#). In English:

<http://www.convergenceenergetique.org/DECLARATION-OF-LEZAN-GARD-28th>

[10] The declaration was drafted and approved during the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in Cochabamba in Marc 2009, in presence of more than 30 000 people of more than 140 countries. <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/>

[11] <http://www.arretsurimages.net/TMP-B63A1CAA45-5134-30773>

[12] <http://www.ejolt.org/2012/04/pressure-rising-from-anti-shale-gas-victories-to-a-big-debate-on-oil-and-gas-exploration/>