

The ZAD: an autonomous zone in the heart of France - The fight against the construction of a new airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes

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In a heroic struggle of solidarity and resistance, locals and activists of the ZAD have been fighting against the construction of an airport for many years. [January 17, 2018, the French government has eventually cancelled the project for good, a rare and precious victory. The struggle continues on the future of the ZAD as an alternative form of collective life, a different world than the dominant one.]

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It all started decades ago with the local resistance against the construction of a second airport near the city of Nantes in western France. Eight years ago, this resistance culminated in the establishment of a self-organized autonomous zone, commonly known as the ZAD (*Zone à Défendre*, or "Zone to Defend"). Since then, the ZAD has been under constant threat of eviction and has withstood multiple attacks by militarized police forces set on clearing the area. With the support of individuals and collectives across France and from abroad, the occupation continues to this day.

HALF A CENTURY OF PLANNING AND RESISTANCE

Plans to build a second airport in Nantes were first developed in the mid-1960s. The authorities wanted to decentralize economic activity away from Paris to other cities in France. In the 1970s, the regional council designated the town of Notre-Dames-des-Landes, north of Nantes, as the site for the construction of the airport. At the time, farmers and local producers started to organize to resist the construction and raise awareness.

The construction of a rail network for high-speed trains in the late 1980s pushed the plans to build an airport north of Nantes to the bottom of the agenda until 1994, when the government revitalized the project in order to reduce air traffic at the two Parisian airports of Roissy and Orly.

In the 2000s, the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin reaffirmed aspirations to decentralize economic activity and to turn Nantes into an international hub. After being pushed by political elites at both state and regional levels, the project was recognized as "promoting the public interest" in 2008. Two years later, the multinational corporation Vinci was selected to build and run the airport.

As early as 2000, a network of groups and organizations was created to organize an awareness campaign and to undertake actions in the area. In 2009, local activists and residents invited the French climate action camp, resulting in hundreds of activists visiting the zone. They occupied buildings that had been left empty by the authorities and built their own yurts and shacks.

Little by little, self-organization and collective decision-making structures were put in practice. Soon, support collectives were set up in various cities across the country and beyond: it was the beginning of one of the longest struggles in the recent history of French social movements.

THE RADICAL STRUGGLE TO DEFEND THE ZAD

The ZAD is sometimes home to activist training camps where participants are introduced to the particular aspects of the resistance in Notre-Dames-des-Landes — for example, how to move quietly through the countryside without being spotted by the police, who have set up check-points in the area.

Rallies and political meetings are organized on a regular basis to connect, educate, participate and to exchange experiences, but also to make sure that whenever the time comes, a vast network of people will be at the ready to protect the autonomous zone if it is threatened by the authorities.

From the pensioners involved with the Citizen's Organization Against the Construction of the Airport (ACIPA) articulating their defense around environmental concerns, to young radicals who were also on the front-lines of the Nuit Debout protests in Paris and elsewhere — they all agreed to be ready to physically defend the zone in case the police arrives; a tactic that has already proved its worth in the past.

In the fall of 2012, during the so-called "Operation Caesar," more than one thousand troops aided by helicopters and armed vehicles invaded the area. They were met with multiform and determined resistance. While small groups of zadistes built barricades and threw rocks, others ran the communal kitchens. Demos were regularly organized outside of the zone blocked by the police. After several glorious weeks of struggle, the police eventually canceled the operation and the ZAD called for a massive rally to rebuild the facilities destroyed by the cops.

In a recent article for *Strike! Magazine* [\[1\]](#), Ina Fever attempts to explain the strong and diverse resistance that took root in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. The author argues that current political struggles have been very successful in mobilizing people to block useless and harmful developmental projects when it articulates an ethical position: "no, there won't be an airport."

This echoes the strategy promoted by the Invisible Committee, which suggests that in contemporary capitalist societies, direct action should be focused on the networks and infrastructures that allow for the flow and circulation of capital rather than on institutions and national assemblies.

"AGAINST THE AIRPORT AND ITS WORLD"

Following Fever's idea, it can be said that the occupation of land against the construction of the airport is in fact a struggle that is structured along two axes: it is against a certain type of society, and it is also for the ZAD — an alternative form of collective life, a different world.

The occupation of the construction site is fundamentally anti-capitalist, as it blocks the creation of another site — the airport — that would be used by French authorities and corporations to brand the

region as “innovative” and “business friendly” and to attract investments. Therefore, it could be compared to what Mehmet Dosemeci has called “social arrest” in an earlier piece for *ROAR Magazine* [2], referring to society’s refusal to let the state keep the flows of capital accelerating:

Slow Food, Conservationism (be it ecological or local-cultural), Anti-War, Anti-Globalization, Radical Environmentalism — all of these sites and banners of contentious politics are directed not at a static state structure that arrests movement, but are themselves in fact about stopping or arresting an unbridled and accelerating capitalist system.

These types of resistance have been going strong all over Europe, often targeting “big, useless projects” (the NoTAV in Italy for example), or in the US (the Standing Rock occupation against the construction of a pipeline in North Dakota clearly resonates with the struggle at the ZAD).

Moreover, the desire to stop the normal functioning of capitalist society by people and to think and decide together — without the leadership of any party or institution — on what a better organization of society could look like, lies at the root of square occupations that multiplied across Europe, the United States and the Arab world in 2011-’12. Nuit Debout [3], which could be seen as France’s version of the “movement of the squares,” drew heavily on the experience of the ZAD. In fact, in the Place de la République in Paris and hundreds of other cities across the country, similar slogans to the one used by the ZAD were often seen in demos against the downsizing of workers’ rights. Banners in the streets and the occupied squares of Nuit Debout often declared “No to the *loi travail* and its world.”

“A LIFE THAT IS POSSIBLE WITHOUT THEM”

The different sections of society that have gathered around the struggle at the ZAD have a clear objective: building a world without states and beyond capitalism. As the Collectif Mauvaise Troupe sums up in the introduction of their last book [4], “if it has become so crucial for the political classes to crush the ZAD, it is because the ZAD constitutes an insolent demonstration of a life that is possible without them.”

There are around 200 people living permanently on the zone, in addition to some 2,000 people coming and going. Some residents lived in the area before the struggle started, others came here afterwards to join the fight or simply to find a place to live free from state harassment. Some even say that many migrants have found a quiet place to stay at the ZAD on their way to the UK. In the past eight years, all these people have been cooperating according to principles of mutual trust and solidarity.

The ZAD also has its own production networks. Vegetables and fruits, flour and bread can all be found at the “non-markets,” where these products are given away for free or in exchange for a voluntary contribution, called a *prix libre*. Wholesome meals are prepared and served every time larger meetings and rallies are organized, and any newcomer will certainly find a space to sleep in one of the several dormitories.

In its recent book, *Defend the ZAD* [5], the Collectif Mauvaise Troupe powerfully describes the spirit that animates participants, and how it contrasts to life in modern societies: “Here, where we are, the expression ‘lawless zone,’ which they intend to be frightening, has taken on a radically positive set of associations. For unlike what takes place in the streets of ‘well-policed’ cities, in the ZAD no one sleeps outside and everyone eats their fill.” What’s more, with the aid of its supporters across the country, the *zadistes* also produce and publish their own books, pamphlets and videos [6], while the ZAD’s own radio station, Radio Klaxon, will soon be broadcasting in both French and English.

However, this space of free living also has limits. The collective organization of life requires patience, determination and mutual support — things that are sometimes lacking, especially in times of crisis. For example, at a recent debate at the ZAD, one resident was reading texts written during the confrontation with police in 2012 and warned participants that sexism during confrontation with police was very high and unbearable with the return of a toxic “masculinity of the barricades.”

Additionally, a few years back, tensions surrounding the use of weapons against police were also rife. Learning to live and agree on the forms of the struggle is always difficult, as contemporary capitalist societies trap us in a state of dependency on state institutions and market mechanisms or, following Cornelius Castoriadis, in heteronomy: the submission to a sacred superior entity dictating the rules and customs of everyday life.

A VITAL STRUGGLE IN A BLEAK ATMOSPHERE

As the French presidential elections are approaching fast, Prime Minister Valls’s government seems to have nothing to lose. Its legitimacy and popular support — especially among left-wing voters — has plummeted due to a clear pro-business line and racist attacks against its non-white citizens. Who hasn’t heard of the disgrace caused by the “burkini affair”? The government is trying to win the support against the rising far right and it seems obvious to many that the state has clearly took an authoritarian turn in the wake of the recent terror attacks in Paris and Cannes.

In the last few months, we have also seen a reinforcement of state apparatuses and the criminalization of social movements following the four-month mobilization against the Loi travail. During the demonstrations against the state attack on workers’ rights, many were injured by police forces in Paris, Nantes and Rennes and other cities across France.

This violence echoes the police killing of Remi Fraisse, who died resisting the eviction of another ZAD camp in Sivens in 2014 [7]. What’s more, the police murder of Adama Traoré, a young man living in a Parisian banlieue, as well as the very recent eviction of the “Jungle” [8] — the autonomous migrant camp in Calais — reminds us that racialized populations and migrants are seen as disposable by a xenophobic state that continues to protect the image of a white European society.

The following weeks and months will be crucial for the ZAD and other struggles around France. Although some sources argue that the airport project could be scrapped because it has become too costly for Vinci to pursue, other commentators have said that the government had nothing to lose, and that after clearing the Jungle, the ZAD of Notre-Dames-Des-Landes is next on the list.

In this troubling environment, we are left to wonder if the ZAD will manage to resist another attempt by the state to destroy this inspiring experiment of communal life and collective decision-making that has been burgeoning in the green fields of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. One thing is certain: the hundreds of people that have been visiting and staying in the zone seem to be determined and ready to defend it.

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P.S.

* <https://roarmag.org/essays/zad-autonomous-zone-france/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://strikemag.bigcartel.com/product/strike-issue-17-autumn-2016>

[2] <https://roarmag.org/essays/occupy-revolution-mehmet-dosemeci/>

[3] <https://roarmag.org/essays/nuit-debout-republique-occupation/>

[4] ESSF (article 42915), [France: the battle of Notre-Dame-des-Landes against a new airport - A community in struggle has come into being](#) .

[5] <http://www.lyber-eclat.net/livres/defendre-la-zad/>

[6] <http://www.lyber-eclat.net/livres/defendre-la-zad/>

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sivens_Dam

[8] <https://roarmag.org/essays/jungle-calais-camp-eviction/>