

La ZAD: Another End of the World Is Possible

Learning from 50 Years of Struggle at Notre-Dame-des-Landes

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On January 17, 2018, the French government announced on television, via the voice of Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, that it had given up on pursuing the highly controversial project of building a new airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes (NDDL). This decision capped five decades of political, economic, legal, environmental, and personal struggle. The airport was to be located approximately 30 kilometers north of the city of Nantes in western France; instead, the site became la ZAD—the *Zone à Défendre* (Zone To Defend). What began as a small protest camp grew into a world-famous space of autonomous experimentation that lasted almost nine years.

At the very moment we are publishing this article, a massive police operation has invaded the ZAD to evict it. The French government was prepared to lose the fight to build an airport, but no state willingly cedes autonomy to anyone within its territory. The ZAD’s moment of triumph as a single-issue struggle may have spelled its doom as a space of contagious freedom.

Yet the state alone could never destroy such a vibrant project. As we will explore in detail below, dynamics that emerged from within the occupation enabled the police to resume the offensive. In some regards, this pattern is built into the life cycle of movements based around concrete objectives; but in other regards, what took place at the ZAD is avoidable, and we should make a point of learning from it if we hope to create permanent autonomous zones.

The similarities to the story of Standing Rock are obvious. In the US, starting in April 2016, thousands of people mobilized to block the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through North Dakota. Following months of clashes with the police, President Barack Obama announced that the Army Corps of Engineers would deny the permit for the last leg of the pipeline; protesters declared victory and many left the camp. Within a couple months, Donald Trump’s administration reversed the decision, the police evicted the last stragglers in the camp in a brutal raid, and the pipeline proceeded after all. The ZAD and Standing Rock offer cautionary tales about the perils of victory.

As one zadist wrote presciently to the occupiers of Standing Rock at the peak of the latter movement,

“All the things you dream of: do them now, while your enemies are reeling, trying to figure out their next angle of attack. There won’t ever be less repression, less police and private security, less drones and dogs. I personally regret not pushing harder before our possibilities shifted, not taking things to the fullest expression they could have reached. I hope you won’t have these same regrets.”

In the following text, we trace the history of 50 years of resistance to the airport at NDDL and analyze the internal dynamics that set the stage for today’s police raid.

The Airport at at Notre-Dame-des-Landes: From the Cradle to the Grave

1960s: The Story Begins

The idea of building a new airport in the Nantes area dates back to the 1960s. At that time, the Paris region (*Ile-de-France*) was constantly consolidating more and more capital. To reverse this tendency, the French government decided to embark on a new project of decentralization by creating new areas that would be attractive for investors.

In the *Grand Ouest*, the geographical area including the cities of Nantes and Saint-Nazaire, local authorities were concerned that the infrastructure of the region was lacking. For example, the dilapidated airport at Nantes fell short of their desire for a hub that could receive millions of passengers, provide trans-Atlantic flights, and offer a runway for the Concorde, at the time the new national aeronautic jewel. In 1965, the *Loire-Atlantique* prefecture agreed to start looking for an additional aeronautic site for the region.

In 1968, Notre-Dame-Des-Landes was selected as the best place to build a new airport on account of its location between Rennes and Nantes. Local farmers opposed the project; they formed the first organization to defend against it in 1972. In 1974, a zone d'aménagement différé (deferred development zone) was created at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. This official decree allowed the government to progressively purchase land in the area. However, the oil crisis of the 1970s and the opening of the new high-speed railway line (TGV) at Nantes in 1989 delayed the project for several decades.

2000s: The Airport, Again

In 2000, the project was revived under the government of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. This delighted Jean-Marc Ayrault, then Mayor of Nantes (and later Prime Minister under François Hollande's presidency), who had personal plans for restructuring his city. The plan from 1970 was already obsolete. After creating a special committee to study the issue, the local authorities received an official report validating that the project promoted "public utility and interest." Despite the newly adopted *Grenelle de l'Environnement*¹ stating that no new airport should be built in France, on February 9, 2008, the French state signed a decree valid for 10 years stating the "public utility and interest" of building the new airport.

At this point, various groups began to object that environmental issues had been set aside in order to speed up the validation process. Opponents of the airport organized awareness campaigns on a local and national scale.

In 2009, their determination paid off. That summer, local activists and residents organized a "climate action camp" on the designated site of the future airport. Hundreds of activists discussed the issues at stake in the decision to build an international airport on top of these fields and historic farmers' houses. The first major occupation took place during this camp. Understanding that the French government was determined to pursue the project, activists decided to occupy the site of the future airport by squatting the buildings and farms that were left empty by the authorities and building their own shacks and houses. On the incandescent ashes of the "climate action camp," the ZAD was born.² When the occupation began, several organizations decided to follow the legal protocol by presenting the *Conseil d'Etat*³ with several objections to the airport project, focusing on its environmental impact. The *Conseil d'Etat* rejected their demands.

Among the numerous objections raised to the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the major ones include:

¹ The *Grenelle de l'Environnement* is an official political report adopted in 2007, dedicated to "protecting the environment." Like so many other official political meetings and documents dealing with ecological issues, greenwashing is one of the chief objectives.

² Although the climate action camp marks the creation of the ZAD, the first occupation on site actually took place in 2007 at the *Rosier* ("rose bush") squat, an old house located within the ZAD's perimeter.

³ An official institution in charge of advising the government in preparing laws and decrees, having the status of being the supreme administrative judge.

- In addition to the obvious fact that airplanes are accelerating global climate change, the new airport would destroy approximately 2000 hectares of well-preserved forests and wetlands. The project would have a massive impact on the biodiversity of the region, including on hundreds of animal species and natural water sources within and around the ZAD that are officially “protected.”
- The airport would also affect human beings, destroying farming lands and eliminating the chief income of local farmers and their families. The contract for the construction of the airport included measures to expel the inhabitants of the construction zone. Living near an airport would also raise health and quality of life issues for residents.
- There were also economic problems relating to the airport. Why put money into creating a new airport rather than renovating the existing one? What would happen to the older airport once the new one was operational? A new airport in the region would impact the locals in other ways, as taxes would increase.
- Finally, the lack of transparency. At first, authorities promoted the new airport by explaining that it would be bigger than the existing one. However, opponents revealed that the plans for the future airport indicated that the additional space would not be used to increase the “comfort” of passengers in the terminals, but rather to create a bigger shopping area. This increased popular opposition.

2010s: The Struggle Intensifies

In December 2010, a subsidiary company of VINCI, the internationally well-known French Concession and Construction Company, was selected as the state’s new partner for the airport project. According to the contract, VINCI would receive funds from the state to design, build, and operate the future airport for 55 years, in addition to the existing airport between Nantes and Saint-Nazaire. The opening of the new airport at NDDL was set for 2017.

After the official announcement, the French multinational was targeted in solidarity actions across France and elsewhere around the world. The decision did not discourage the opponents. On the contrary, more and more people showed up to occupy the land. Many activists were eager to experiment in alternative forms of autonomous living based in mutual aid and self-sufficiency. Parcels of land were transformed into collectively cultivated gardens; collective spaces were created as well as several forges, bakeries, and mills. Here is a rough translation of a text published in December 2011 summarizing the general idea behind the creation of the ZAD at NDDL:

Nôtre Dame des Landes

The struggle against the NDDL airport is an attempt to create a breach in the capitalist ramparts. Because for many of us, to attack capitalism, we had to start somewhere!

This is 2000 hectares that will be razed to the ground and covered with concrete, with the delusional goal of creating a HQE (High Environmental Quality) international airport. We could laugh about it if the local population in favor of this project were not imagining making a profit from it. But the rich will become richer and the poor, poorer. The realization of this project led by VINCI, a multi-national company

present on all the continents (also in Khimki, near Moscow, where VINCI wants cut down the last local forests, and where the weak resistance on the ground confronts ultra-violent far-right wing militias, in a context in which political assassination is common place), was therefore chosen, in defiance of the local population, who made a call to occupy the land in 2009 to resist this decision.

The occupation has been going on for two years now, during which a handful of anti-capitalist resistance fighters have developed food, cultural, and political autonomy. The squatting of this zone to defend (ZAD) slows down the construction of the airport, leading to the charging of activists, repression against them, and starting not long ago, eviction procedures, but we will resist whatever the cost!

This is why, today, we are calling for the re-occupation of the site and for international rebellion!

It goes without saying that when they evict us, we will resist! (And international solidarity is necessary if we want to put capitalism to an end!)

Against rampant capitalism and the sacred power of money, there is only one solution: insurrection!

The ZAD progressively became a sort of autonomous community, drawing a wide range of individuals from longtime farmers living on the ZAD to anarchists, anti-globalization activists, liberals, and leftists. The zadists themselves emphasize this diversity. Years later, in 2017, “Camille” (a standard *nom de guerre* among activists), a zadist at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, explained:

“The movement itself is large and has great solidarity, but there’s a great diversity of people and opinions (...) From those who’ve got degrees to people from the streets or those who just want to get away from their families (...) some are already politically engaged, some just broken by conventional life.”

The growth of the ZAD led to an intensification of legal battles to block the airport project. The opponents filed many appeals and legal proceedings followed one another for several years. In 2012, two local farmers went on hunger strike in front of the Nantes prefecture to protest the project. The newly elected Socialist President François Hollande promised that the government would not physically enter the zone until every other means available had been exhausted.

Nevertheless, early in the morning of October 16, 2012, the government of Jean-Marc Ayrault—now Prime Minister—launched *Opération César*, the official name given to the eviction of the ZAD.⁴ More than one thousand police forces, two helicopters, and several armed vehicles were deployed in this operation.

On the first day of Operation Caesar, police forces slowly progressed through the occupied zone, destroying everything in their path. However, the authorities had underestimated their opponents: unanticipated resistance from zadists stymied the operation. Over the following days, activists gathered to reoccupy and defend the ZAD. Demonstrations delayed police operations while activists erected barricades and pelted the police with stones. The wide array of actions,

⁴ This recalls Julius Caesar’s invasion of France, which set the stage for him to abolish democracy in the Roman Republic. It’s not surprising that the French security forces chose such an authoritarian title for their attack, but it is striking that they framed themselves as an external force invading France.

the unfailing solidarity among zadists, and their knowledge of the terrain were major assets. The NDDL movement gained more and more support and visibility while Operation Caesar bogged down.

After days of perpetual harassment on one side and tenacious resistance on the other, the government suspended the operation. This decision was not taken lightly. On the first day of the eviction, the Prefect of Loire-Atlantique, Christian de Lavernée, had declared, “If the state can’t take back the zone, then we should be worried for the state.”

The French government had admitted defeat. This was a major turning point in the psychological war between the authorities and the zadists. The following month, on November 17, 2012, several thousand people showed up to reclaim and reoccupy their land and to clean and rebuild the ZAD.

A week after the successful reoccupation, the government changed its strategy, seeking to restore its public image by announcing the establishment of three different commissions—one gathering experts, another focusing on establishing dialogue between the different parties, and the a third composed of scientists—in order to find a solution to the conflict.

In 2013, the movement around the occupation of the ZAD continued growing; numerous agricultural and living projects appeared. In the meantime, direct action and sabotage became more frequent, as chronicled in a zine entitled *Défendre la zad, Paroles publiques depuis le mouvement d’occupation de la zad de Notre-Dame-des-Landes, 2013–2015*.

For example, in March 2013, a group went to a construction site outside of Nantes. This construction site was slated to start building a major highway connecting Saint-Nazaire, Nantes, and Rennes in order to facilitate the transport and delivery of equipment to build the airport at NDDL and to connect it to those three cities. The group destroyed ducts, cables, surveyors’ equipment, and six electric poles. They justified this attack with the following arguments:

1. Defending the zone and fighting against the airport and its world doesn’t just mean occupying the ZAD or living there while awaiting eviction. It also means building a real offensive against the project by developing practices of active resistance.
2. The movement must not fall into the traps of the government and be neutralized. That includes the commission aimed at establishing dialogue, with all its negotiations, agreements, compromises, potential moratoriums, and other frauds.
3. Direct action will increase the pressure on the decision-makers.

Indeed, on April 2013, the dialogue commission presented its conclusions. Once again, the airport project was announced to be of “public utility,” but this time the commission asked for a few improvements regarding environmental compensations. For example, in view of the hundreds of protected species living on the ZAD and its surroundings, the commission determined that financial compensation should be granted in return for... four of them. This underscores the cynicism of the state.

On Saturday, February 22, 2014, the resistance movement flexed its muscles with a massive demonstration in Nantes. As one of the participants wrote, this day represented “one of these magic moments where life resurfaces with a roar.” This day of actions remains one the high points in the struggle against the airport, not only because of the intensity of the fighting in the

streets of Nantes, but also because it showed that the participants were capable of breaking out of the narratives that are usually imposed on activists by the state.

On that day, they proved they were not only defending a specific territory, but were capable of going on the offensive. Projecting themselves into the heart of a major metropolis and attacking it from the inside, the zadists used tactics that had been developed inside the ZAD including barricading, ambushing, building huts, and hosting collective discussions and meals. Early in the morning, over 500 tractors converged on Nantes, causing traffic jams on all the major routes around the metropolis. Some of them established a picket in front of the Nantes Atlantique airport. Then tractors entered the city and blocked the tramway lines.

Meanwhile, a colorful and heterogeneous crowd took over the streets. According to the previously mentioned account, the general atmosphere was carnivalesque, distinct from the usual monochrome, mournful, and powerless demonstrations organized by political parties and trade unions. That day, it seemed that everything was possible:

- A group built a tree house in front of the prefecture building;
- others attacked economic and political infrastructure and smashed store fronts;
- riot cops were spray-painted with a fire extinguisher;
- a police station and an administrative court were attacked;
- a drilling machine and an excavator were set on fire at a construction site;
- the VINCI real-estate headquarters was looted and destroyed; and
- a train line was sabotaged in solidarity with the No TAV struggle in the Susa Valley.

The author of the abovementioned account emphasizes that despite the confrontations between activists and police, demonstrators never disassociated themselves from each other or scattered: “there was room for all the practices that constitute the movement.” From the beginning of the ZAD, a diverse range of people had occupied a large open space and created multiple contrasting atmospheres and spaces within it; this experience spilled over into the demonstrations.

For all these reasons, the demonstration on February 22, 2014, caught the authorities off guard, sending a clear message to the government again and opening new breaches for future struggles. The total cost of damage from the demonstration exceeded a million euros.

On July 17, 2015, the Administrative Court of Nantes once again rejected all the appeals that had been presented against the airport. The construction of the airport was to move forward. The authorities were gambling that they could outlast the opposition, or at least outgun them.

On October 30, a month before the COP 21 (the United Nations Climate Change Conference), the government, via the voice of its Prime Minister Manuel Valls, announced that the construction of the new airport at Notre-Dame-Des-Landes would resume in 2016. Due to the Court’s decision, the authorities and VINCI wanted to accelerate the process and start the construction as soon as possible.

The COP 21 opened in Paris on November 30, 2015. Despite the newly established State of Emergency that followed the ISIS attacks, earlier that month, people gathered at *Place de la*

République to oppose the international political spectacle. The forbidden demonstration ended with long confrontations with police forces on the famous Parisian square and mass arrests. Repression did not succeed in intimidating environmental activists, however; actions continued on a daily basis until the Climate Change Conference ended on December 12, when 195 countries signed a supposedly historic agreement to save the planet by limiting global warming. On the one side, a permanent state of emergency; on the other, the proponents of the airport, greenwashing an imposed consensus reality.

Zadists and other activists organized several days of action at the ZAD and in other major cities nationwide for the beginning of 2016. On January 9, 2016, over 20,000 people demonstrated near Nantes by blocking roads and freeways to show their opposition to the reopening of the airport project.

On January 13, the trial opened for the families who lived on the site slated for the airport. More than 1000 supporters gathered in front of the Court in Nantes. Another national day of mobilization against the airport took place on January 16. In Paris, people gathered at a large banquet to denounce the State of Emergency, then took the streets with banners showing their support for the ZAD.

Bad news arrived on January 25, 2016. The High Court of Nantes called for the evictions of the remaining inhabitants of the ZAD. Eleven families had until the end of March to leave their houses. Among these families, four local farmers faced additional peril as their cattle, buildings, machines, and fields—their entire livelihoods—could be destroyed or seized at any moment by the authorities. This decision did not weaken the resistance against the airport project, as a direct action report from February 1 illustrates. Some zadists responded by building new houses and infrastructures within the ZAD. In addition, there was a national call to demonstrate against the airport on February 27.

Meanwhile, the government announced a local referendum on the airport issue. This strategic decision can be analyzed at different levels:

1. The proposition can be seen as a way to muzzle and weaken the movement, imposing a question from above in place of the narratives arising from below;
2. the vote would be used to divide people into those in favor and those against the project;
3. the vote could offer a new way for the government to legitimize and impose the project by justifying it through participatory direct democracy.

On February 27, between 30,000 and 50,000 people responded to the national call to action, gathering on the main national roads next to the ZAD. Over 60 busses carrying demonstrators from all over France joined pedestrians, motorists, over 800 cyclists, and about 50 tractors in what is considered to have been the highest turnout at a demonstration that Notre-Dame-Des-Landes had seen since the beginning of the struggle.

In the meantime, another major succession of events diverted the government's attention from the ZAD, as confrontations erupted in every major city of France in opposition to the newly presented *Loi Travail*. Consequently, no evictions took place in the ZAD that March, as had previously been planned.

On June 26, 2016, while the struggles against the *Loi Travail* were slowly losing their intensity, the results of the local referendum on the airport were released, showing 55% of the voters in favor

of the project. Opponents of the airport criticized the wording of the question, the geographical area of the vote, and other aspects of the referendum. Nevertheless, it was certain that this result gave more perceived legitimacy to the French government in pushing through the project once and for all. Fortunately, however, the French political agenda ended up playing to our advantage. As presidential elections were set in April-May 2017, politicians were focusing more on their campaigns and careers and therefore decided to not get their hands dirty in the controversial project until after the voting.

In May 2017, newly elected President Emmanuel Macron decided to continue misleading everyone with his campaign promise of doing politics differently. He named a mainstream environmental figure, Nicolas Hulot, to be Minister of the Ecological and Solidarity Transition. Before making a final decision, the new government officially announced a new mediation plan to lower the pressure from protesters and study all the aspects of the highly controversial airport project one last time.

Six months later, in December 2017, three mediators handed their study to Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, explaining that between the options of building a new airport and expanding the existing airport in Nantes, both options were “reasonably conceivable.” As the possibility increased that the project would be abandoned, a new media campaign to delegitimize zadists emerged. An article posted on the official ZAD website explains that this “last hope” attempt to discredit the ZAD and its resistance originated from the *Gendarmerie* (the national police force in France, which has military status), who sent photographs and false information to several major media channels.

Journalists, thrilled to have a major headline and opening subject, published and commented on the information and pictures without verifying their accuracy or questioning their origin. This smear campaign described zadists as “terrorists” ready to “fight and kill” if necessary, using projectiles full of acid and *pétanque* balls (heavy metal balls used for the eponymous traditional game) spiked with razor blades or nails. Suddenly, the ZAD turned into a battlefield where activists dug tunnels and entrenchments, built weapons caches for firearms and incendiary devices, and hid traps in the forest.

The question of whether some activists had weapons in the ZAD is a distraction. Could such weapons have posed a lethal threat to heavily armed police forces? No, the threat of violence at NDDL always came from the state; it was always the police who determined its intensity. The police are the ones who have repeatedly murdered activists who posed them no threat, and not the other way around. The important thing is to understand what objective drove the authorities to spread such allegations. One doesn’t have to be an expert to see that the primary objective was to weaken the struggle against the airport by creating divisions within the ZAD and its supporters. By portraying zadists as “terrorists” and the ZAD as a major national threat, the authorities sought to spread anxiety among the public so that when the eventual eviction took place, fewer people would identify with its inhabitants.

January 2018: The Airport Is Canceled

As the official decision regarding the future of the airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes approached, police forces were deployed in the ZAD to reaffirm the government’s legitimacy and control over this “too long abandoned and uncontrolled” piece of land. Fearing what could be the fiercest demonstrations since Operation Caesar in 2012, the authorities allocated considerable

resources for the anticipated eviction. Between 400 and 500 riot policemen (CRS) were sent to Nantes and Rennes to put down demonstrations. In addition, around 500 military officers (*gendarmes*) were deployed near the ZAD. The *gendarmerie* helicopter was back in the sky of NDDL, keeping every person in the ZAD under surveillance and studying every single house, farm, hut, and other form of shelter constructed through the years of occupation. Large armored vehicles usually used for clearing roads of obstacles and barricades were sent near the eviction site. On the eve of the Prime Minister's declaration concerning the future of NDDL, the massive law enforcement presence clearly gave an impression of siege, as the 300 people living inside the ZAD were under constant surveillance and pressure. Police units surrounding the ZAD sought to ensure that no vehicles or resources could enter the zone. The idea was to isolate the inhabitants from outside supporters in order to speed the eviction process. In the meantime, we learned via mainstream media that even more police squadrons were on their way to the ZAD.

On January 17, 2018, a little after mid-day, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced on live television the long-awaited government decision. After a long and solemn introduction to his discourse, he finally said: "Today, I note that Notre-Dame-des-Landes is the airport of division. Since the election of the President of the Republic, we are mobilized together to strengthen the country's security, and to transform it. The seriousness of the economic stakes that the country is going through, the seriousness of the security challenges it faces, demand that we stay together focused on our priorities. The project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes will therefore be abandoned. This decision is logical in view of the stalemate in which this project is located. Fifty years of hesitation have never made a forgone conclusion. This decision is without any ambiguity. The lands will return to their agricultural vocation. Contrary to what the report proposes, they will not be retained to carry out the project later."

The decision was clear. The government acknowledged its inability to pursue the construction of the future airport; finally, they were dropping the controversial project. However, shortly after uttering these words, Edouard Philippe revealed the government's true intentions. To assuage the loss of the new airport at NDDL, the French government would commit to guarantee that the cities of Brest, Nantes, and Rennes would have easy connections with other European metropolises. To do so, the government wanted to not only reorganize and extend the existing airports of Nantes and Rennes, but also to intensify the connection between air and rail in the west of France by improving rail infrastructures and assuring more train connections between the western metropolises, Paris, and its international airports.

Finally, regarding the situation in the ZAD, the Prime Minister pretended to open a dialogue with its inhabitants, a dialogue that looked more like an ultimatum or warning: "[t]he three roads that cross the site of Notre-Dame-Des-Landes must now be returned to free circulation for all. Squats overflowing on the road will be evacuated, obstacles removed, traffic restored. Otherwise, the police will carry out the necessary operations." Later, he added: "In accordance with the law, expropriated farmers will be able to return to their lands if they wish to do so. The illegal occupants of these lands will have to leave by spring or will be evicted. (...) From now on, law enforcement are mobilized to ensure that this process is conducted in compliance with the law and that squatters gradually release lands that do not belong to them." The French government was hoping that people would conclude that the ZAD no longer had any reason to exist as the project had been dropped. Zadists would have until the end of winter break—the end of March—to leave the ZAD and their houses. Otherwise, the authorities would carry out a complete eviction and "cleaning" of the zone.

This decision is not surprising. Any government fears losing control over its territory, its subjects (citizens or not), and their personal initiatives. Everything that does not originate from the government's decision or the law it enacts must either be wiped out or integrated into the legal framework. The latter approach is the easiest way for the authorities to participate in the trend of "alternative projects" while imposing control over such initiatives. One of the many examples illustrating this trend within French cities is the multiplication of legalized "artistic" squats—opened with the approval of local authorities and under their supervision—which accelerate the constant process of gentrification.

Numerous journalists were present at the ZAD at the time of the Prime Minister's announcement to cover the reactions of its inhabitants. Some local collectives and organizations planned a press conference to comment on the government's decision. The abandonment of the airport project was received as a great victory from some of the zadists. However, others were wary regarding the future of the ZAD and the real objectives of the government. Here is the common press release made by the anti-airport movement on January 17, 2018, originally posted on the official ZAD website:

Common press release from the anti-airport movement following the government's announcement.

At lunchtime today, the government finally announced that the airport project located in Notre-Dame-des-Landes has been abandoned.

We do note that the "DUP" (ed. Declaration of Public Utility) will not be extended. The project will definitely be null and void by February the 8th.

This is an historic victory against a destructive project. This was made possible thanks to a long mobilization that has been both diverse and determined.

First of all, we'd like to sincerely thank everyone that mobilized against this airport project over the past 50 years.

Regarding the future of the ZAD, the whole movement would like to confirm the following points:

- The need for the farmers and people that were expropriated to recover their rights as soon as possible.
- The refusal of any eviction of those who came here over the last few years to live and defend the place, and who wish to continue living here and look after the area.
- The will to let the various actors of the struggle (farmers, naturalists, locals, groups, people who have lived here for a long time or have just joined us) handle the land of the ZAD in the long term.

To implement these measures, we need to put a hold on the institutional redistribution of the land. In the future, this place must remain a place of social, environmental and agricultural experimentations.

Regarding the question of the reopening of the road D281, a road closed by the state in 2013, the movement will take the matter in its own hands. A police presence or intervention could only create tensions.

On this memorable day, we would like to address a strong message of solidarity towards all the struggles set against other destructive projects that threaten territories. We are calling on everyone to join us on the 10th of February to celebrate the abandoning of the airport project and to keep on building the future of the ZAD.

Acipa, Coordination des opposants, COPAIn 44, Naturalistes en lutte, les habitant-e-s de la zad.

The official press release raises a lot of legitimate questions and concerns:

- First, while signed by only five collectives and organizations involved in the struggle against the airport, the official statement claims to be the voice of the entire “anti-airport movement.” This is already concerning, as it excludes the voices and opinions of other individuals involved in the struggle and life within the ZAD.
- Secondly, in presenting an official press release in front of the national mainstream media, this part of the zadists fell into the trap set up by the government, accepting dialogue, negotiation, and ultimately legal conditions concerning the future of the ZAD.
- Finally, by tacitly agreeing to reopen the D281 road and even to assist the authorities by removing every obstacle and barricade on it themselves, the signatories of this press release accepted the terms of the government in a way that could facilitate the eviction of the ZAD.

In other words, the press release signed by only a part of the protagonists involved in the life of the ZAD endangered not only everyone who might be opposed to dialogue, but also the future of the ZAD itself. As we will explore below, this press release reintroduced the tensions between the different components of the ZAD. Worse, it revealed that the same authoritarian specter that haunted past struggles is still undermining our struggles today.

Opening New Horizons: Reflections on the ZAD at NDDL

Destroying the Myths behind the ZAD

Throughout the years of struggle against the airport project, the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes acquired a reputation—not only among anarchist circles worldwide but also among liberals and mainstream environmental activists. However, it is almost inevitable that when a struggle receives a lot of attention, its image tends to be idealized and consequently falsified.

Unfortunately, the ZAD is no exception to this rule. After years of effort and collective work to build a new kind of reality outside of the destructive, exploitative, and authoritarian world we all know, the government’s decision and the official victory celebration from part of the zadists revealed the long-suppressed conflicts between the different political tendencies of the participants.

Whether in a small countryside community like the ZAD or in our oversized cities, living with others involves quarrels, agreements, conflicts, friendships, fights, love, and all the other complexities of human relations. Refusing to acknowledge this reality in order to maintain the pure and virtuous image of a united political struggle is dangerous, as it divorces people from

their own individuality, differences, and autonomy. Moreover, making the conflicts within a struggle invisible does not help us to learn from them in order to be better prepared for future struggles. With the survival and the legacy of the ZAD at stake, we consider it important to share some articles written by dissident voices on the situation within the occupied zone following the government's official announcement and the "historical victory of the movement."

On January 19, 2018, two days after the government's decision to drop the airport project, an article entitled "*NDDL: La lute continue! Une réalité cachée*" was published on Indymedia Nantes. The article explains that contrary to the image depicted by some zadists in the national media, the actual situation within the ZAD in the aftermath of the so-called "victory" was catastrophic. According to the author, some "dream-seller productionist capitalists" had also settled in the ZAD and were working on evicting the "less desirable" activists from it. After the official announcement of the "victory" against the airport, some zadists close to political organizations (*Front de Gauche*, *NPA*, *Europe Ecologie Les Verts*), collectives, committees, and associations (*ACIPA*, *CO-PAIN44*, *ADECA*, *ACEDPA*) were attempting to transform the Zone To Defend into a legalized alternative occupied zone.

According to the author, in order to do this, they agreed to collaborate with the authorities to find a common agreement on the future of the ZAD. In the process of seeking to legalize the occupied zone, they dissociated themselves from more radical or autonomous individuals, denying their longtime involvement in the struggle against the airport and their contributions to life at the ZAD. Finally, the author adds, even if the ZAD is an important case within the recent history of international autonomous struggles, it is important to acknowledge that the collective life within the ZAD was complex, difficult, and not without issues—including violence, drug and alcohol use, and even informal militias. Moreover, regarding the myth of unity at the ZAD, the author asserts that there had never been solidarity "between the white sheep and black sheep" on the ZAD, except when police forces entered the occupied zone in 2012.

This personal account raises an important question: if the ZAD has been victorious, what sort of victory are we talking about? In the article entitled *Mouvement, où est ta victoire?*, the authors explore the real nature of the "victory" that was announced by self-designated leaders.

The authors do not deny that the government has abandoned the airport project, which obviously represents a victory for the struggle. But if we consider the impact of the ZAD at a larger scale, can we still call it a victory? Have we won enough to be talking about making peace with our adversaries already? The ZAD did not succeed in defeating VINCI or the State, or even transforming people's relations or power dynamics. Indeed, according to the article, even if the project has been abandoned, VINCI, the chief beneficiary of the airport project, would still receive financial compensation from the state and would continue to reap profits by upgrading the Nantes airport and increasing its role in airport management on a national scale. Moreover, now that the future of the ZAD was threatened anew, conflicts regarding private property and land exploitation were breaking out to such an extent that, as the authors put it, "the ZAD will be an agricultural battlefield." The article also mentions power struggles, imbalances within decision-making structures, and class inequalities among the inhabitants of the ZAD.

Finally, considering the question "Is this struggle victorious against capitalism, sexism, speciesism, classism, and authoritarian practices?" the authors caution that "after the abandonment of the project emerges the risk of forfeiting the political struggle by setting aside its radical dimension." Unfortunately, through the ploy of opening negotiations, the French government succeeded in creating potential representatives and mediators within the ZAD in order to

pacify those who might resist. Once more, this article reveals the contrasting interpretations, objectives, and aspirations of the various individuals involved in the struggle against the airport. As soon as some semblance of victory was reached, liberals, political opportunists, and others called it quits.

In short, without the single issue of the airport to rally around, fractures appeared along all the fault lines within the social body that had maintained the occupation. This put the zadists who prized the ZAD not only as a protest camp but also as a break with the existing order in an awkward position. With some locals and farmers also desiring to “return to normal,” should they break with their fellow occupiers and prepare to take on the state alone, or attempt to hammer out some sort of compromise with them even if this meant answering to the pressure of the state? We can appreciate the difficulty of this question.

The danger that the struggle will be pacified is exemplified by one extremely controversial decision: the agreement to clear and reopen the road D281, as the government requested in its official announcement. As the authors of the text *Mouvement, où est ta victoire?* explain,

“What was missing for these dominant factions of the movement to gain legitimacy from the government is obviously the demonstration that they were able to bring order to the zone, the order of the movement approaching that of the state. This is how one can understand the cleaning of the notorious road D281, a veritable showdown within the movement.”

This decision increased the tensions among the different participants in the ZAD. In a letter addressed to “all who recognized themselves in the movement against the airport and its world,”⁵ the authors explain:

“We attach a strictly political importance to the future of this space and what is played out here: the questioning of the speed, of the place that the automobile takes in our lives and the terrain we occupy, and finally of a certain vision about the functionality of the space where the usage is decided from above rather than locally on the ground. These questions will always be relevant after the hypothetical end of a police threat. For many of us, this road is also a part, small but vital, of this struggle for space to imagine. That is why if this road becomes once again a normalized road, to the detriment of all the praxis that have been created there over the past five years, a part of the movement would experience it as if it were the beginning of the normalization of the occupied zone.”

Unfortunately, these concerns and warnings did not change the decision some people made to clear the road in compliance with the wishes of the state. On January 22, 2018, less than a week after the official “victory” against the airport, they participated in demolishing the famous “*route des chicanes*.”

This hasty action left more than one activist stunned and furious. Watching other activists destroying the living spaces you spent hours building—just because it has been decided by some sort of unofficial authority—is a form of violence. In reaction, numerous articles appeared expressing personal stupefaction and disapproval, or simply to publicly denounce the authoritarian tendencies that had finally erupted into plain sight.

⁵ The original version is available in French.

In one article, an activist living in Mexico shared his opinion on the movement's decision to help the government clean D281. The author raises numerous legitimate questions: Why were they so quick to act? Why didn't they wait for the government's ultimatum before clearing the road? Who negotiated with whom? Who promised to do what? Who is going to lose this game in the end? For the author, these negotiations with the government looked like under-the-table agreements. He wonders why the principle of majority rule was suddenly implemented in making the decision to clean the road, rather than the practice—longstanding at the ZAD—of taking all the time necessary to discuss a matter until everyone arrived at a unanimous decision.⁶

In response to this attempt to reintroduce the old model of democracy, participants in the ZAD made it clear that they had refused to be part of the old world from the beginning, and openly rejected the concept of democracy itself. Decision-making processes aside, regardless of what the arguments were for cleaning the road, doing so was like setting down one's weapons before signing a peace treaty. It was a fatal tactical error.

By removing obstacles from D281, it seemed, the movement sought to erase any vestiges of the old, "improper" ZAD that could impact its new image as a victorious democratic movement in dialogue with the democratically elected authorities. The author of the aforementioned text also criticized a statement of Julien Durand, spokesperson of the ACIPA, during a radio interview:

"Since the project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is abandoned, there is no longer a threat, therefore we are no longer in a phase of resistance. From now on, we must think differently, that is to say, thinking about the future of the zone so that there is good understanding, serenity, and dialogue within it to achieve a normal daily life."

This quote speaks for itself. This self-proclaimed leader of the ZAD decided to turn the page on the struggle, falling for the illusory promise of a pacified future for the occupied zone—a vision in which the ultimate goal was to return to normal daily life.

What does Julien Durand mean when he refers to "normal daily life?" Does his model of "normal daily life" line up with the one imposed by society at large? His statement could be interpreted to mean "We won! Now let's go back to normal!" Moreover, as the abovementioned author highlights, this statement denies "any political dimension and the eminently fruitful nature of conflicts inherent to this heterogeneous community experience." According to the author, it is concerning that such participants in the ZAD would seek to exclude the supposed "margins" from its official history. The author asserts that the "victorious" movement seemed to be (re)constructing a narrative that would muzzle dissident voices, omitting many important aspects of the collective of the ZAD. "Leaders" and states both seek to rewrite history for their own purposes.

Finally, the author explains that one of the essential dimensions of the ZAD was that it gave a lot of individuals the possibility to escape from the deadly cycle of this society by putting their desires and hopes immediately into action. These were the rebels who made the airport impossible. He concludes with a warning:

"If it is they who today must, on the seemingly consensual motive of 'disengagement from the *route des chicanes*,' be sacrificed on the altar of 'normalization' or 'pacifica-

⁶ This is not to say that consensus process is always ideal, either. For further analysis of democratic decision-making, we highly recommend the book *From Democracy to Freedom*.

tion,' then the exceptional adventure of NDDL will fall miserably, for our greatest shame, into the sad and dismal dustbin of history."

The author of the previous article was dead on the money. A couple of weeks after the clearing of D281, on February 5, 2018, police entered the ZAD to escort official cleaning vehicles on the "route des chicanes." Several dozen *gendarmerie* trucks, anti-riot fences, and a helicopter were deployed on the ZAD for this official "cleaning operation." If you give the authorities an inch, they will take a mile.

In a desperate ploy to reinforce their legitimacy in the public eye after the decision to cancel the airport, authorities invited several media outlets to show that they were regaining control of the zone. For the first time in months, police units and trucks were able to reenter the heart of the ZAD and to clear the once-occupied D281. Due to the presence of law enforcement during the cleaning operation, some zadists made the following call:

"Today, contrary to what has been asked for in exchange for the lifting of the works' blockade, a dozen heavy police trucks entered the ZAD to 'protect the works' (the official cleaning operation) that were not blocked, searching a living place on their way, which we experienced as a provocation.

We are calling all the sympathizers of the movement against the airport and for the future of the ZAD to come tomorrow (February 6, 2018) for peaceful rallies to ensure that the (cleaning) workers pass without the cops and to protect all the living spaces in order to prevent any eviction attempt.

-Some occupants of the ZAD"

It is hard not to see this call as naïve, especially in relation to the authorities. It appears that the authors realized, to their surprise, that the intruders had not abided by the agreements that zadists had made with the government. What a shock!

In our opinion, it was a mistake to join a discussion with the authorities in the first place. It always ends the same way: the leading figures of a movement enter negotiations, and in doing so they show that they are prepared to give up some of their autonomy. The authorities take advantage of this to offer a few meaningless concessions; in the end, they regain control of the situation, after which they no longer have any reason to continue making concessions or abiding by agreements.

Any form of leadership is an Achilles' heel for the struggle: *so long as there is a leader, they can be deputized, replaced, or taken hostage*. It would be much more difficult for the authorities to pacify movements if every participant had a sense of their own agency and was determined not to let anyone else make decisions for them.

Once law enforcement entered the occupied zone without encountering fierce resistance, an eviction became inevitable. On February 23, 2018, several activists informed us that the situation within the ZAD had worsened. Starting with the official cleaning operation of D281, the police presence and occupation increased. On a daily basis, between 20 and 50 police trucks occupied D281. Officially, they were there to oversee the cleaning process; unofficially, they were there to increase surveillance and repression. Helicopters and drones flew over the ZAD, recording living places, fields, and farms for topographical purposes. Video cameras, antennas, and listening stations were deployed in the ZAD. The police began to raid living spaces. These strategies of

intimidation are nothing new; they served to prepare the ground for the eviction planned for the end of March.

Since the “victory” of the ZAD, several dissident autonomous and anarchist voices have denounced what they perceived to be authoritarian tendencies within the struggle. These criticisms were nothing new, but after the cleaning of D281, they became more audible. The chief groups described as displaying authoritarian tendencies in general assemblies and other decision-making processes include the more institutional elements of the struggle such as *ACIPA*, *COPAIN*, and *Naturalistes en lutte*, but also some of the “fringe” occupiers of the ZAD, including some involved with the *Comité pour le Maintien des Occupations* (“Committee for Maintaining the Occupations,” or CMDO).

This is not the first time such concerns have surfaced. Regarding the case of D281, an article posted on Indymedia Nantes asserts that people affiliated with the *Maison de la Grève* took part in destroying the living spaces established on the occupied road alongside members of the previously mentioned organizations. The article also refers to the tensions that occurred during the dismantlement between the inhabitants of the road and the “agents of the imaginary order party.” The author concludes by saying:

“We could talk about a world turned upside down were it not that, after having stood alongside them in this struggle and elsewhere, this is not a surprise for anyone anymore. But still, crawling in front of the prefecture and being to that extent its armed wing, it seems that with the victory the masks come off. Count on us not to let this pass in silence. It has to be known.”

The least we can say is that the events described in this account are extremely concerning. As the author says, for years, “appélistes”⁷ and their sympathizers have stood alongside anarchists and other autonomous individuals throughout all the major struggles that have taken place in France. On numerous occasions, we have fought on the same side, taking part in the same actions, confronting the same police, facing the same state violence and repression, assisting each other in the same difficulties, and meeting in the same general assemblies—even if difficult power dynamics emerged repeatedly.

One can read another perspective on these events from the CMDO in a text entitled *The ZAD Will Survive*, distributed in newspaper form on February 10. This is their account of the controversial decision to clear the road:

“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 movement—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

⁷ “Appélistes” are a sort of neo-Blanquist network inspired by a text entitled *Call* and the works of Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee. Although their effort to reconstruct a non-Marxist communism is noteworthy, some of them have made a point of not calling themselves anarchists—and we should probably take them at their word.

turning to outright shouting matches, to finally dismantle the two cabins that stood in the roadway.”

In reaction to the dismantlement of D281 and the seizure of power by some groups and individuals at the ZAD, a call was made to discuss these issues on February 10, 2018 at a distance from the national convergence and demonstration in the occupied zone. About 200 people answered the call and gathered to discuss the logic of political composition (political alliances due to common interests, affinity groups, etc.) and the concentration of power within the struggle. This personal account sums up the general situation within the ZAD, from the unexpected political alliances that decided the future of the zone to the explicit censorship and exclusion of anarchists and other radical elements in order to facilitate the pacification of the struggle.

One of the conclusions of this unofficial discussion was that the most institutional tendencies of the ZAD had attained hegemony. Usually, leaders would meet off the record to reach agreements, then use the assemblies to impose their decisions. Due to these tendencies, but also to the way that less experienced individuals often found themselves on the receiving end of mockery or exclusive behavior, some of the occupants had deserted their spaces. The most radical individuals found themselves a minority within the assemblies, their voices nearly inaudible. In such a situation, assemblies show their limits as a horizontal model for decision-making.

Alongside this stratification of decision-making within the movement, participants in the discussion identified an increase in control and censorship in the communication venues and media of the ZAD, such as the local committee mailing list and the official website, zad.nadir.org.

This is how, as the author explains, anarchists, anti-speciesists, and other autonomous elements found themselves isolated as they faced the state, hierarchical political organizations, and trade unions. An Italian activist who participated in the discussion reported that the situation reminded him of what happened at the Val Susa (Italy) during the No TAV struggle.

The logic represented by the “liberation” of D281 is obvious in retrospect. The official position of the movement was to continue the occupation while collaborating with the state. With control of the land at stake, the critique of property was suddenly inconvenient. In any case, as today’s eviction demonstrates, in the absence of a unified, illegal, and uncompromising occupation of the ZAD, there was no question of the government permitting the occupiers to remain. In the end, it was not the intransigent anarchists who were being unrealistic.

The author of the abovementioned account notes that what was taking place within the ZAD was also occurring at the same time in many other spaces. Before 2012, the flags of political organizations, liberal political banners, and journalists were not welcome at the ZAD. But following 2012, the atmosphere changed completely. Yet the limits of political compositions are now exploding in broad daylight. “There is no unity within struggles. There are always internal conflicts that we should accept rather than conceal”—as had been done at the ZAD for several years.

This article is valuable because it seeks to present the situation at the ZAD as it really is, with all its ambiguities and complexity, instead of idealizing it. Moreover, as the author explains, doing this is not only a way to support the experiments in progress and the individuals who don’t want to give up the fight, but also to support and spread anti-authoritarian and disruptive positions in general.

For more information about the situation at the ZAD after the cancellation of the airport, read this personal account about the power dynamics and political alliances, and this compilation of articles written by dissident voices in the aftermath of the “victory.”

At the same moment that we published this article, another entitled ZAD: Second Round appeared in France, offering another perspective on the conflicts about whether and how to negotiate with the state, exploring the challenges of maintaining collectivity across different perspectives, and critiquing the tendency of some groups to isolate themselves with a narrative of radical puritanism. Suffice it to say—these are complicated subjects and there are many different sides to the story.

The ZAD Might Be Dead, but the Struggle Continues

On January 9, 2018, shortly before the government announced that they were giving up on building the airport, the public prosecutor’s department of Toulouse dismissed charges against the *gendarme* who had used a grenade to murder the young pacifist Rémi Fraisse in 2014 during a night of confrontations at Sivens, where another ZAD was fighting against the creation of a dam.

This ruling was not a surprise. Since the beginning of the investigation, the French government had sought to conceal its responsibility in this case—although during such confrontations, law enforcement units directly execute orders from higher ranks within the state apparatus. A few weeks after dropping the airport project, the French government launched an eviction operation at the ZAD of Bois Lejuc, near Bure—a foretaste of what was to happen in NDDL. Starting in summer 2016, activists had been occupying nearby woods and villages to prevent the construction of an industrial center of geological storage (*Gigéo*) for the most dangerous radioactive waste. On February 22, 2018, about 500 *gendarmes* entered the occupied woods, raiding living spaces including the *maison de la résistance* and arresting several activists. Nevertheless, despite the violence of the eviction and a strong law enforcement presence at the site, the struggle at Bure is not over, as evidenced by the gathering of committees to discuss the future of struggle that took place on March 3–4.

As we prepare to publish this article, the eviction of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is underway. Yet even if the eviction is successful, the ZAD at NDDL has renewed environmental struggles in France and around the world by spreading notions like direct action, sabotage, mutual aid, self-determination, autonomy, and opposition to capitalism and the state. The ZAD has been a space of experimentation, strategizing, brainstorming, debate, conflict, victories and defeats, and dreams. It will continue to nourish our imaginations as long as we tell its story.

When we do, it is vital that we discuss what happened during the last months of the ZAD’s existence and after its victory. Power imbalances, “leadership,” and authoritarianism represent terrible menaces to our aspirations, as the pacification of the ZAD demonstrates. Reflecting on the ZAD, we have to reconsider how we approach struggles; we have to become more skilled at identifying and breaking up concentrations of power, so we can prevent them from jeopardizing our capacity to open new horizons.

In opposition to the old leftist myth of a future revolution that will liberate us all one day, like a miracle or prophecy, we believe that the present is the greatest imaginable gift and the best time to engage in struggle. As some friends once wrote, “There is no secret for revolution, no grand dialectic, no master theory. Revolution is simple. Go out and meet folks who are just as passionate as you are— and if they don’t realize it, help them along the way. Combine forces,

scheme, and make plans. Then, do it.” Acting enables us to embrace self-determination and discover that we have the power to open breaches within an overdetermined world. These breaches offer opportunities to experiment and experience new forms of relations, living arrangements, and aspirations.

As our future darkens from one day to the next because of industrially produced climate change, capitalist immiseration, and intensifying authoritarianism, this sort of secession becomes ever more vital. This world will never change if we hesitate to cut ties with it, for it is our participation that reproduces it. This is why *we have to secede right here, in the heart of the empire: not to present demands to the rulers, but to seize back the resources they have taken from us, creating spaces beyond their control in which power flows according to a different logic.* This is not a passive conception of what it means to secede. It means creating and multiplying self-sufficient spaces in which we can take on the authorities and win. To borrow one of the most famous slogans of the ZAD, “Secession everywhere!”

We have nothing to gain from clinging to the prevailing order. As other comrades have written, *every unique, self-determined action is a spark that shoots beyond the confines of both the status quo and abstract critiques thereof, threatening both, not to mention those who uphold them.* All the necessary ingredients to bring about the end of their world are at hand. The question is: Are we willing to use them?

The end of the world won’t wait! Fight now! Fight everywhere!

Appendix: What is the ZAD?

This is a translation of a zine written in French by some occupiers of the ZAD, July-August 2015.

The ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes has been a hotbed of struggle for several years. Thereafter, other ZADs have begun to appear everywhere. But what is a ZAD? A lot of people who got involved in its creation behave as if the answer was obvious, but this is a question that is almost never raised. So, this is the question we want to pose to those who use this word, and, to start with, to ourselves.

The authors of this text are a group of individuals who have been living and fighting on the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes for several years and who decided to spend some time thinking about the question of what a ZAD is for us. What we are going to tell you here is our response to our question. It is a subjective response that we don’t consider the only possible answer. We would like you to take it as an invitation to ask yourself the same question with those with whom you share some parts of life and struggle. We hope to see your answers, as many definitions of the ZAD could lay the foundation for a movement that is still waiting for us to give it some consistency.

As the starting point of our reflections, we took the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the one that we know the best, but also the first one created.

Direct Action

For us, one of the facts that distinguishes the ZAD from other places is that it originated from direct action. The latter is not necessarily a hidden or risky action. Living in the ZAD is in itself a direct action: it means squatting in a place in the countryside where there is a large infrastructure project. At the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the ratio of power is such that occupying lands became something “normal,” trivial, which can happen without any complications whatsoever.

Direct action means taking action, often as a group, to fight directly against a situation that affects our lives or the lives of others—without asking any intermediary (such as trade unions, political parties, governments, or other “competent” authorities) to intervene. For example, holding a demonstration against VINCI (the concessionaire of the airport project) would be a symbolic action, but going to their actual buildings, blocking the doorways, and making sure that no one can actually work would make it into a direct action. Direct action could also include preventing bulldozers from moving forward during an eviction or construction project, occupying and cultivating a piece of land, burning down a prefecture building, barricading a road, or collectively planting an orchard on a field slated to be covered with concrete. In a world that makes us feel powerless, it is a way to regain control of our lives.

As our desires are in conflict with the interests of the state, illegality is a reality here and often our tactics are also illegal, as the ZAD would have never existed legally. We do not recognize the state’s legitimacy to decide for us what should be permitted. What the state wants is to control us and assure the enforcement of the law, hence the advantage of forbidding everything that is outside of its control. However, rejecting the state’s legitimacy is not an end in itself. In this struggle, there is a diversity of tactics: legal actions, excavators’ sabotages, acts of resistance by the inhabitants of the ZAD to the state’s expropriations of houses and farms, expropriations of supermarkets, large demonstrations, ambushes against the police... This diversity constitutes the strength of this struggle, and the fact that an action is forbidden does not make it less legitimate.

The media often discuss non-violence and violence by assigning them moral values: it is implied that “violence” is bad, when the “violence” they are talking about consists in resisting and defending ourselves against the police or inflicting material damages. For us, violence is on the side of the state and its decision makers—for example, through territorial planning and development. Moreover, labeling individuals who resist as violent takes part in a maneuver to discredit them and the ZAD. Be aware that an individual can both be cultivating the land and fighting with the police.

Building Another Reality

An important aspect of the ZAD is the idea of building another reality in which we are less dependent on the state and capitalism. Living here means learning to handle things with what we have, or finding what we need without having to rely on professionals or experts. We do not call an electrician to fix a problem because if we have electricity, it is not through a legal way: either we are producing it ourselves, or we connected ourselves to the electricity network illegally. For some of us, it is politically important to know that we can build our houses with what we found in the dump, that we can fix everything with the blue farmer string. For others, it means taking the time and giving themselves the means to cut wood and create beams for present or future constructions. In any case, learning to be more autonomous for practical things is a

way of defending ourselves against a system aimed at making us dependent. It is not a question of each individual learning how to do everything, but rather of helping each other and sharing our knowledge and resources so we can take care of things all together.

We live on the zone on a daily basis, therefore we try to create the level of comfort that we need to feel good. This is also linked to the desire of projecting ourselves in the long-term, to live permanently here. For many people, the ZAD is not only a direct action or a way to show their ideals—it is also their life, and their home. We know that our houses and vegetable gardens could be destroyed at any moment, and that we might be forced to leave, but we live and organize as if we could stay here for the rest of our lives: we can't just stop doing things just because they could evict us at some point.

We are not simply against the government; we also want to create something that is more suitable to us. The ZAD is a place that is managed by its inhabitants, who decide what happens within it: the state doesn't have any say about it anymore. In the same way that we don't want to follow the official regulations to build our houses, we want to decide everything, and figure out our way of getting organized.

An Open Community

Those who live and fight on the ZAD share numerous common backgrounds and experiences: living within the same space; being confronted with clashes when cops or fascists show up; living with each other on a daily basis. There is also solidarity and mutual aid on a daily basis: giving somebody a hand, lending what the neighbor doesn't have, sharing what we cultivate or collect. Of course, all this doesn't take place without a hitch, but despite everything, it binds all the inhabitants of the ZAD together. In this way, the ZAD is, less by choice than by fact, a form of community.

But the ZAD remains open. Everyone can, if they wish, come live in the ZAD for several days or weeks. Not every community or collective will necessarily welcome you with wide-open doors, but overall, the ZAD is accessible to anyone, even if the individual doesn't know anyone or comes from a completely different culture. Often, squats or groups of individuals involved in direct action are not easy to approach or access (for reasons related to friendship, affinity, or safety, for example). One of the strengths of the ZAD is that it offers an open door to possibilities of living and struggling that are different from the models imposed by the dominant socio-economic order. Such possibilities play the role of key moments and meeting places that social movements often provide too.

The ZAD brings together a variety of individuals who come from really different worlds and backgrounds: from the activist's milieu—local or not, familiar with street tactics or squats; from the farmer's milieu—where some of them left their jobs; or from a completely different background, or from all of them at once. All these people sharing the same space, living and fighting together, creates a big mess, but also, and mostly, a great wealth. While everyone tends to isolate us, sharing a space and working with all kinds of individuals is already a victory that inspires us.

This openness and diversity make the ZAD a meeting place, a crossroads of struggles: some nomads who build bridges between a lot of different places live alongside established individuals who carry long term projects; some people find within it a stable basis from which they can take risks elsewhere; already constituted groups arrange to meet here; strangers forge new complications.

But the ZAD is also deeply rooted in its territory: the link with “historical” inhabitants, those who were already present before the project and who were often the first opposed to it, represents one of the major strengths of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. It was a group of defiant inhabitants who made a call to occupy the land, a call answered by people who were living further away. These links and connections, the mutual aid or rants and quarrels that are shared on the ZAD also involve the “historical” inhabitants of the ZAD themselves or their nearby neighbors. The occupiers came progressively to reinforce the local struggle that had already existed for years.

Some Shared Ideas

Behind our ways of living, fighting, or building relationships, there are some ideas that, in our opinion, are largely shared. Even if we never reach a collective agreement about them, they are part of the ideals we aspire to.

By opposing an airport project, we fight in reality against territorial planning and development, in which people’s lives are decided beforehand by engineers and architects who impose the locations of stores, housing, airports, and more. They want spaces in which everything is controlled, surveyed, and planned. From its birth, the occupation movement fought not only against the airport project, but also against the managerial logic of those in power.

In the world of the developers, most exchanges are made via money. The current system enables some privileged individuals to enrich themselves by impoverishing others. We want at the same time to make this system collapse and to create relations that are not based in money.

More generally, we aspire to step aside from the logic of domination, which gives more value and power to some individuals over others: those with IDs over those without, men over women or others, white people over those who are not, heterosexuals over homosexuals and others, “French” people over foreigners. These inequalities also exist within the ZAD, but there are attempts to make this space hospitable for everyone.

Finally, we don’t grant the state or anyone else the authority to decide how we have to live and what we have to experience. We try to organize the life and struggle at the ZAD without hierarchies, by giving the same power to everyone. This is not something that runs smoothly, but rather something based on constant debates and permanent experimentation.

An Expanding Movement

After Operation Caesar, numerous energies converged towards the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. A lot of us wanted this energy not to simply stay focused on Notre-Dame-des-Landes. This reminds us of the image of a rhizome where this energy would be concentrated, crossbred, growing here and then radiating out to feed the struggle everywhere else. The idea would be for the individuals who are fighting locally against infrastructure, metropolis, or territorial development projects to use the ZAD as an example: like an idea, an image, that could help them to skip a step, that could enable them to benefit from its media coverage, that could give them a concrete reference point to direct people to so they wouldn’t have to explain a lot of abstract concepts. That “the ZAD” belongs to a largely shared *imaginary* helps people to act locally in their own ways, against the same forces. Through this process, we hope to break the image of a so-called democratic society, and to become more numerous in fighting, everywhere.

Here, some rare and uncommon conditions are combined, such as little intervention from the police and state, some cultivable fields, and a desire to live without hierarchies. The life that is created from the intersection of these conditions provides one idea of a possible future among thousands of others possibilities. This is not an alternative showcase—because we do not create the ZAD to prove anything—but a concrete experience to organize our own lives for ourselves.

The idea of a ZAD seems to have the strength to gather and federate groups and individuals within the dynamics of struggle. A ZAD movement seems to appear everywhere—Roybon, Testet, Agen, Echillais, Oléron, and more... Let's think about the traps and obstacles that we frequently face: from the action of political parties that manoeuvre among these opposition movements for political ends, to the idealization of a “zadist's way of life” without any political convictions, without forgetting the criminalization of such movements that is intended to empty actions of their meanings, or even the demand formulated to opponents to offer the proof of a viable alternative. All this prevents a global questioning and reduces each problem to technical or legal issues... To avoid depoliticization or being taken over by the state and its henchmen, it is time to think collectively about what we are carrying in order to create a revolutionary struggle.

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Learning from 50 Years of Struggle at Notre-Dame-des-Landes
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