

Defending the

MAUVAISE
TROUPE
COLLECTIVE

zad

l'éclat

mauvaise troupe

defending the zad

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In the Autumn of 2015 the government once again announced that the building of the airport of Notre-Dame-des-Landes was about to begin. Since then they have been repeating their intention to evict those who live and farm together from the zad¹. With the combined force of the gendarme's gas grenades and Vinci's² bulldozer's, they want to try to finally get done with everything that is alive and thriving in the bocage³ "as soon as possible".

Faced with this renewed threat, this text is a call to defend the zad everywhere, and the contagious hope it contains in these arid times. The zad as a conviction that it is possible to stop destructive projects fostered on us by those who claim to govern us. The zad as a space where different ways of inhabiting this world - fully and generously - are invented in the here and now. It is a hope rooted in histories we hold in common, enriched by the momentum of tens of thousands of rebels and relationships woven thick by time. The words that follow evoke certain decisive fragments of this adventure, they are like blazing bearings for the future.

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We are some of the inhabitants of the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and accomplices in tune with its rebellion. With *Mauvaise Troupe* we have been working for several months harvesting and disseminating stories which will be published in a series of interviews and a book this spring. But from a sense of urgency, we have decided to pick up our pens to spread far and wide how important it is to defend the zad. In a world ruled by the 'I' we aspire to speak as 'we'. But the 'we' here on these pages goes beyond us, during the telling of this story it might embody one of the many collective voices of the movement whose strength lies in its diversity and differences. This is not its only voice, but an attempt to put into words what is being built in common amongst us, something that can never be uprooted, the living entanglement of our disparate experiences and views.

1. zad, meaning ZONE A DEFENDRE (to defend) is a détournement / hacked word play of the term zone d'aménagement différé which is a technical planning term for a large scale development project.
2. The world's largest multinational construction firm commissioned to build the airport.
3. A bocage is a term for pastureland divided into small hedged fields interspersed with groves of trees, typical of pre 1950's France.



Victory in the face of Cesar

It was autumn 2012, in the bocage of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. It was the moment when suddenly all eyes turned towards this struggle against an airport project that was due to land on nearly 5000 acres of wet lands, farmland and hamlets. The memories of that autumn, which turned us all upside down and inside out, are still ripe. Whether we were near or far, we were all caught up by the intensity of what took place.

It's early in the morning of the 16th of October. On a country lane bordered by hedgerows and engulfed by a fog of tear gas, a never ending column of riot vans sets off. This armada leads the demolition machines come to rip down dozens of farms and squatted cabins, that according to the eviction order received a few months before, are: "without rights or deeds"

Back then the state seemed to have everything on its side: Massive financial means, over 1000 mobilised troops (geared up with state of the art equipment and ruled by an iron fist of discipline), mass media to broadcast its propaganda, and as 'legal' base for its authority its "Declaration of Public Utility" (planning permission for large public infrastructure projects) . Of course this airport will bring jobs, growth, the ecological transition and even security, in a word, it stands for all the fetishes peddled and guarded by those who govern over us.

Since the first protests against it in the 1970s, and following the projects revival in the early 2000s, the airport has become increasingly unpopular thanks to years worth of independent studies and alternative information. Every year that passes sharpens our prying eyes and pierces the blindness. From towns to villages, people begin to speak out and the issues converge: climate breakdown, protecting agricultural land, safeguarding biodiversity and defending sites of resistance to the consumer desert that spreads from the metropolis. For more and more people the airport seems to be just a way to line the pockets of the bosses of the public works and construction industry, especially the main contractor and builder of the project, multinational Vinci. But all the usual public enquiries and consultations ignored the opponent's solid arguments and never risked uncovering the errors of those who commissioned them. Since the state royally ignores the very laws of which they are meant to be the guarantor, that concern such 'developments' (bio-

diversity protection etc.), the anti-airport organisations, notably ACIPA have brought the struggle into the courts. For years they have meticulously erected bureaucratic barricades of paperwork to delay the start of the construction. One by one nearly all the cases filed against the airport have been rejected by the courts. On most other fronts, those with such ragged determination end up admitting defeat and yielding to the 'inevitable' march of progress. But in the bocage, those who inhabit the zad go on, refusing to surrender and make way for a construction site. The preliminary surveys, test drilling and boring or the procedures for 'environmental offsets and compensation' are systematically blocked and sabotaged.

In the offices of the prefecture (Police/interior ministry HQ), where the project of the Great Western Airport is being dealt with, a police operation aiming to secure the area for the start of the construction has been planned for weeks. Some bright spark, brimming with arrogance had the absurd idea of calling the intervention: "operation Cesar" fitting for this land of Asterix⁴ On the 16th of October after having deployed his troops, the Prefet (local interior minister) confident that he has crushed the die hard opponents of the airport, declares - that "by 10am everything was over." He clearly has not quite figured out yet the determination that is facing him.

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Since that early 16th of October morning facing the cops, there is *us.* At first we are few, but already we are strong, thanks to the deeply anchored nature of this struggle and the multiple encounters it has already generated.

We are groups of 'squatters' who steadily arrived in the bocage following the invitation from the "residents in resistance" collective. We became attached to these lands in resistance, to the winding paths that we wander searching for mushrooms and blackberries, to the adventures and celebrations, to the collective work days.

We frantically run around our homes and cabins wielding makeshift shields and climbing gear to perch in the treetops, with stones, fireworks and a few Molotov cocktails to push back the assaults, lemons to protect ourselves from the tear gas and laptops to counter the mainstream media propaganda... We run and run, in the deep mud, breathless, trying to hamper the police's manoeuvres and then we vanish behind the hedgerows and into the thickets that we have got to know so well. We wait for hours under the pouring rain crouching behind barricades that burst into flame as the troops approach.

We are the original residents and farmers of the zad, for us the idea of leaving

4. Asterix the cartoon character is based in Brittany and the region.

this place has always been inconceivable. Despite the never ending pressure and the precarity of an unknown future, we resisted this long so that we could keep the gardens that we tender, the ties with our neighbours, the farms that work to the rhythm of the milking hours and the joy that the ever changing light of the bocage gives us. We were not directly threatened by this first wave of evictions thanks to a deal that was struck at the end of a long hunger strike in 2012 and that still protects, provisionally, the houses which remain legal. But without hesitation, we opened our homes and barns turning them into refuges and logistics bases, from where we can resist together.

We are from the surroundings, some seasoned activists, others farmers in solidarity or just neighbours suddenly disgusted by the situation. We meet in a barn called 'la Vache-rit'⁵ deeply convinced that in this moment we have an active role to play. We are armed with are piles of dry socks, cameras to film the evictions and witness police violence with, banners and biros to write angry letters, and chainsaws to reinforce the barricades with a few sacrificial trees. Amongst us are many elders carried by the memories of fierce struggles that this region has seen, resistance which has already cost "France's economic power" dear, such as the cancelling of three planned Nuclear Power stations in the last 20 years, at Plogoff, le Pellerin and le Carnet. We too are facing the gendarmes, our bodies blocking the roads.

We are a community of struggle coming into being.

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At first the barricades between us and the cops feel like frail structures. Built out of junk in the speed of the night from the carcasses of old cars and used tyres, hay bales and everything we can get our hands on, what materialises from them is, above all, an increasing intractableness.

Our first victory during those endless days and nights, is that faced with such a vast deployment whose sole objective is to corner us into giving up and running away, we hold our ground, whatever the costs. Our first victory is that we defend ourselves, despite the fact that nothing enables us to foresee victory.

Despite this, several of the zad's buildings are rapidly reduced to ruin, even the last bits of rubble are taken away in a skip. It's as if they wanted cleanse even the final fragments of our memories. But many other places under threat remain standing.

5. A play on words – meaning nastiness and laughing cow.

“After the first week of the evictions, there was the initial demonstration in Nantes and I had to make the introductory speech, I was trembling, and suddenly I had this idea to list the names of all the places that had been evicted and those that remained. The original place names but also those made up by the occupiers movement ⁶: la Bellich’, le Coin, la Gaité, les Planchettes, les 100 Chênes, le No Name, les Fosses noires, les Vraies rouges, le Far west. For me it showed how this zone that they claim is empty was in fact brimming with life.”
Jasmin, Naturalists en lutte. (collective of amateur and professional naturalists who resist and map the zone)

No one can pretend that they did not feel the fear and the doubts, the fragility that shuddered through us during those times. But then there is a moment where a shared certainty emerges, that if there is the slightest chance, however infinitely small, to be able to influence the situation that we are living through, then we must grab it. That certainty enables us to overcome the sleepless nights, the thick mud, police projectiles and the damp. It’s about keeping ones head high and accepting that resistance is always a gamble. In that autumn of 2012, once the dice are thrown everything accelerated.

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Every day more and more people come to the zad. At the Vacherit there is an unbelievable amount of supplies, so much stuff that this agricultural building that was given over to the struggle now resembles Ali Baba’s cavern, with its mountains of dried fruit and boots, hills of medicines and chocolate bars, warm clothes and battery powered radios. The to-ing and fro-ing across the zone, and our ever-fluctuating improvised logistics, means that the amount of vital stocks never ceases to change, yet never threatens to run dry. Night after night the barricades become more imposing, tirelessly rebuilt after every assault. Thousands of people spend their days living through the rhythm of the events via the live news updates on the zad’s website. On Radio Klaxon (which pirates the same 107.7 FM signal of Vinci Motorways information station) the broadcasts fill the air with news of the cops’ positions, intercut by hundreds of messages of support that flood in from everywhere.

At the market garden of Le Sabot, and then at the squatted farm Le Rosier, farmers from the four corners of the region, brought together by the collective COPAIN,

6. The names are often puns and play on words, demonstrating the creativity of the movements. For instance, “100 chênes” means “100 oaks” but phonetically also “without chains”; la “vraie rouge” (the “true red”) is a reference to the name of another place “les fosses noires”, meaning “the black pits” but phonetically also “fake black”.

throw themselves wholeheartedly into battle. Their “vigilant tractors” multiply the material force of the movement, piling up bales of hay and pylons to block the lanes or encircling threatened buildings to protect them. The spirit of revolt that once breathed life into this region - from the farm-workers movement⁷ of the 1970s, which together with the farmers whose livelihoods were threatened by the project, contributed to the start of the struggle against the airport - seems to be rumbling in the fields of Loire-Atlantique again.

Local committees spring up across France, over 200 of them. They coordinate transport together to get people on the ground, or organise all sorts of solidarity actions at home: distributing alternative information, occupying town halls, rowdy visits to local branches of the Socialist party, opening up the Vinci toll barriers to provide free transport for motorway users, sabotaging building sites, holding demonstrations and gatherings...Every one of these gestures spreads the struggle to the national level and gives it a new dimension, the scale of which we only really become aware of during the reoccupation demonstration. Announced long ago, it was a strategic gamble to shift the stakes of the struggle. It would no longer be just about preparing to resist the evictions, but showing that even if they managed to drive us out, we would return - “a month later” - with many more, and build something even more powerful than what they thought they could destroy.

It's the 17th of November 2012, following four weeks of demolitions and clashes, the cops melt away from the landscape and the space opens up for a human tide of 40,000 people. At the start of the demonstration the little village of Notre-Dame-des-Landes has been so totally taken over by the crowd that it seems that the hundreds of tractors might not even be able to leave and join in the march. A few kilometers up the road, we see countless planks and joists being passed from hand to hand and disappearing into the forest. Snuggling in the heart of a chestnut grove a village has risen up from the ground in a single day, with its kitchen and workshop, dormitories and meeting rooms, its “Black Bloc Sanitaire”⁸ shower block and compost loos, and its “NO TAVern” a boozier named after our sister struggle in the Val de Susa, against the high speed train line (Treno Alta Velocita). For several months this new village, “La Chat-teigne “ will be a rallying point for local committees, who take turns living there. That night tens of thousands return home with the sense that we have slain Cesar and changed the course of history.

7. A peasants movement born out of the coming together of industrial workers and farmers in Loire Atlantique (West of France), around May 1968 . It was largely inspired by Bernard Lambert's book *The Farmers in class struggle*.

8. Another play on words, sanitary block and black bloc, a tactic where demonstrators maintain anonymity by all dressing in black and hiding their identity, and engaging in confrontational acts of resistance.

Dozens of us find it just impossible to leave, so gripped by the intensity of the adventure that we are ready to desert our jobs and flats.

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It's the 23rd and 24th of November 2012. What has taken place here has become so huge that this piece of territory, suspended in time, becomes a daily topic of debate: from the front pages of the local press to headlines in the national media, via discussions in the pub to meetings in high places, the zad becomes the temporary heart of French political life.

“To let such a cyst organise itself, to let it set up in any sustained way, with its desire to harm sometimes with dangerous means, is out of the question (...) We will do everything so that the law is respected (...) so that the works can begin,”
Manuel Valls, then minister of interior (now prime minister) 23rd November 2012.

Well before dawn, on Friday the 23rd, a cohort of mobile gendarmes silently penetrates into the heart of the zad. In the dormitories bodies are swaddled in sleeping bags, packed into tight rows and resting from the great party the night before. The look outs on the barricades ring the alarm, but it's too late. By the time everyone had dragged themselves out of deep sleep, put on wet socks and the now iconic muddy boots, the troops are in position around the cabins of la Chat-teigne. A smashed window and a few generous whiffs of tear gas thrown in and we are chased into the darkness of the surrounding forest.

Before the week is up the authorities want to take back control and wash away the humiliation of the reoccupation demonstration. As the sun rises the tragedy is revealed. The Chat-teigne is entirely in the hands of the cops. At the Rosier, the “vigilant tractors” have been unable to stop the bulldozers, who soon rip into the building. In the forest of Rohanne, suspended in between earth and sky, a band of tenacious friends twist and turn hanging on the ends of ropes that tie them to the highest trees. On the ground small groups of gendarmes escort machines that have come once again to destroy the tree houses perched in the branches. Constructed to physically prevent the forest clearance, the first phase of the works planned to happen just after the evictions, the treehouses have already been rebuilt several times this over the last few weeks, following police attacks.

The news spreads. Many of those who on the 17th of November left with a little bit of the zad still inside them have the feeling that they also left a bit of themselves in the collective building of la Chat-teigne. Hearing of the assault they return immediately to the forest. We are now hundreds finding ourselves amongst the gas and the mist. We hold ourselves together. We dance in devilish circles at the foot of the

trees to which comrades are hanging on tight, to torment the police escorting the machines coming to turn the forest into sawdust. Brushing close to the cops, we provoke and disorient them with the tune of a traditional Breton song, or with our curses rising straight from our hearts rather than from political slogans. We sing, we discuss, we scream, we fight, we cry, we hug.

On the other side the orders are clear: you have to mark their flesh, to break their irrepressible desire for disobedience. After the battle we count the wounded: a hundred of us, of whom some thirty have serious wounds and injuries, all received during Saturday alone. The shrapnel blasts from grenades, the same type that would kill Remi Fraisse two years later on another zad at Sivens⁹, pierce our bodies, shards stay sticking out of our skin. So that next time their painful presence will force us into submission. But this time, there was no question of backing down, and every strike only reinforced our resolve. For ages.

“Well, it was that day when it was chaos in the forest of Rohanne. What I saw there, the violence of the cops, it made me so angry. And since then it’s not stopped making me angry. I could never shrug it off.”
Anne-Claude from the local committee of Blain.

The conflict is also spreading beyond the forest, it’s becoming contagious. On Friday night dozens of tractors converge to the four crossing points of the Loire river, downstream from Nantes. As the evening sets in, Nante’s Cheviré bridge, that of Sant-Nazaire, and the ferries of the Pellerin and Basse-Indres are blocked. On Saturday, in front of the Prefecture of Nantes, 10,000 people take to the streets and throw themselves at the water cannon brought out for the occasion.

Finally night falls in the forest of Rohanne. And then we witness the disorderly retreat of the police under projectiles and wolf howls. Whilst we are wondering what this withdrawal means we hear on the radio that the government has announced the end of *Operation Cesar*.

We know that this is just a battle, and that the project hasn’t been abandoned yet. We now have to face a way more subtle government strategy: The setting up of a “commission for dialogue¹⁰”, a negotiating authority that resembles so many that

9. The Zad in Sivens resisted against a dam project in the Tarn (South of France) that would destroy about 50 acres of wetland and forest for agricultural irrigation. During on the night of October 25th 2014, 21 year old Rémi Fraisse, a volunteer botanist, was killed by a police grenade during a demonstration.

10. This commission of dialogue invited “all actors that wished to take part” to come and discuss the project in order to find a solution to the conflict. It resulted in the conclusion that the airport was indeed a useful project (!)

annihilated social struggles in the past. More than anything it seeks to divide the movement, since it can't take away its territory. But ACIPA, the local civil society group, refuses to participate in the masquerade, to nicely sit together in a private room with "reasonable people". What exactly would there be to negotiate? The equation is simple: either the airport is abandoned, or the bocage is destroyed and its residents evicted.

In parallel, and only a few hours after the rout of Cesar, a few riot vans return and take positions at the cross roads of the Saulce and the Ardillières. These checkpoints, that cut the zone into two and aim to control its entrances, remain for five months. The cops stand there motionless around their vehicles, without anything to attack or defend but the vacuousness of their presence. They powerlessly contemplate the crowds that bypass them. They are subject to contempt, taunts and various types of attack.

Despite an absurd ministry of interior decree banning all building materials from entering the zone, tonnes are brought in via secret paths. "It is still possible to evacuate, even over such a large and difficult zone. You just have to put in the means necessary"" A gendarme specialising in public order confides to a journalist of the *Télégramme* newspaper, "But to hold it, that's impossible."



Inhabiting the zad with all our might.

It's the 12th of April 2013, the deep damp autumn and winter that we have dragged ourselves out of, gives way to the first buds bathed in the light of a sun we have been waiting so long for. The gendarmes finally leave the bocage and meanwhile the government announces that the airport will absolutely get built... "one day". But in the streets of Nantes and between the hedgerows, in the local committee meetings and the common assembly at the Vache-rit there is a shared sense that victory is within reach. And so the demand " NO airport" becomes a certainty, one which we will never let go of: "There will never be an airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes."

The next day is " « Sème ta zad » (sow your zad). Several thousand people wielding spades and pitch forks converge onto the D281, the road that cuts straight through the centre of the zad and which is still punctuated by our makeshift chicanes. Out of the middle of the road rises a look out tower named: "Bison Futé"¹¹, whose slender wooden frame defies the very concept of a straight line. Crops grow once again in the fields, still littered with teargas canisters. Gardens are begun in some of the new spaces that were settled during the winter: la Wardine, les 100 noms, les Rouges et Noires... At Saint-Jean-du-Tertre we plant grape vines which will take several years before they provide us with wine. New huts and cabins are mushrooming everywhere, built to a wild soundtrack ringing from the four corners of the bocage, the irrepressible rhythm of hammering.

With the defeat of Cesar a new page of the struggle is turned. For several months at least, and perhaps several years - the zone is ours. We must make the most of this time out side of time, until their next attempt to turn us into an airport. The exhilarating feeling of freedom is on par with the challenges we face. Whilst the police have been ordered not to venture onto the zone anymore, power however, does not evaporate. It has retreated to adapt its strategy, and hopes that its absence will give way to unavoidable chaos, which in turn will justify their return.

11 "Bison Futé" is a character used in campaigns to predict traffic in France, especially at peak times (e.g. bank holiday week ends), and suggest departure times to drivers in order to avoid massive traffic jams.

You have to picture that during this spring everything was concentrated within a bubbling core of folk, which was more like an expanding explosion than a withdrawal into the self. Since *Operation Cesar* there has never been so many of us nor such diversity living in a thousand different ways on the zad. Following the opening up and collective reclaiming of the Bellevue farm, farmers from the neighbouring areas are spending a good part of their time there. Some local committees with whom new forms of exchange are being developed come to build cabins to strengthen the struggle and to have their own pied-à-terre on the zone. The Naturalists in Struggle meet every month to make an inventory of the flora and fauna, thus building intimate bonds with the marshlands, the natural prairies and the zad's salamanders, without having to live there.

Dozens of newcomers inhabit the bocage. There are those for whom la zad is a refuge because there are no identity controls: From minors running away from home to refugees from Calais who failed to make it to England... There are those worn down by the distress of living rough on the streets, for whom the zad is a haven. There are all those who arrive to set up home attracted by the utopias this place promises. Added to all this is the constant passing through and intermingling, which whilst sometimes exhausting, is further testimony of the hope and curiosity that the magic of the zad awakens far and wide.

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Within this effervescence, in this unique situation at the zad, and the power vacancy, a rare opportunity is offered up, where we have to grapple directly with the things that condition our everyday life both materially and affectively. Faced with the challenge of sharing our lives together on the zone, we step into another battle, this time against and within ourselves. It's no longer about confronting power in its most obvious form, but to struggle against that which is embedded deep within us. There is always, in all of us, a bit of those separated individuals, stuck in their social, cultural and political identities. The defeat of a police operation will never be enough to destroy what remains of the grip of consumerism within us, the devastating addictions, the prejudices, the everyday sexism... How do we free ourselves from the cowardly habit of wanting to delegate everything, which sits so well next to the deadly desire to control everything? The conflicts that emerged in the bocage, whether they were about the uses of property in common or a political disagreement or physical assault, are not so different from those that appear in a neighbourhood or village. Except there are no superior and hegemonic body to arbitrate or intervene. We have to get to grips with the all these complex issues that normally we swiftly silence or entrust to whatever expert

institution: The police, courts, psychiatric hospitals, local council, chamber of agriculture...

For months we dedicate ourselves to acquiring the fine art of give and take which enables us to transcend differences and disagreements, without ironing out our ethical arguments and fertile tensions. In the spring of 2013, the squabbles that erupted over access to agricultural land, perfectly illustrated the difficulties of such a steep learning curve. A few conflicts around rights of use gave rise to a clash of perspectives: that of the earth as a tool of work and that of a nature as something to be left alone and protected from the degradation of human activity. If this opposition was first experienced as utterly unreconcilable, we eventually move on via the tortuous paths of experience. Step by step, we were able to combine the collective reclaiming of the territory by its inhabitants, the sharing of some of its resources – agricultural land, woods, roads and lanes, etc.- and an attentiveness to the importance of saving areas for their own sake, and not just because they answer to human needs. This was how, through conflicts, the harshness of which no one can deny, and out of the confrontation of our different sensibilities, that a certain collective intelligence emerged.

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In 2011, the 4000 acres of property on the zad was handed over by the state and the county council to the company Aéroports du Grand Ouest (AGO), a subsidiary of Vinci. A quarter of this area is made up of forest, woodland and scrubland, another quarter is still cultivated and lived on by the resisting farmers who refused to leave. But whilst waiting for the start of the construction works, the remaining 2000 acres are meant to be redistributed every year by AGO to the farmers who have been paid compensation for the compulsory purchase of their property and signed a friendly agreement. If for those who have refused to move the airport is a total disaster, for the others however, who have already found land elsewhere, it has simply become a temporary chance to further expand their new farms. From 2013, the resistance movement decided that it would no longer be possible to let Vinci continue to control these lands, nor to let them be used by those accumulating and profiting from the crisis.

In the by-monthly assembly of “Sème ta zad”, the idea for which came out of discussions between farmers and occupiers on the barricades at the Rosier in the autumn of 2012, we discuss the agricultural usages of the zone’s lands. We talk about the collective gardens and what they need in terms of materials and helping hands. We define which are the plots that are for free use, which will then be destined for open field crops from which we expect several tonnes of onions and potatoes. We argue over the dependence on fossil fuels of mechanised agriculture or

over the exploitation of animals. We equip ourselves with a Coopérative d'Usure, Réparation, Casse (Cooperative of Use, Repair and Scrap) and potentially also Utilisation de Matériel Agricole (Use of Agricultural Machinery) the C.U.R.C.U.M.A.¹², a collective space that looks after the ageing tractors that have been donated to the struggle. The “cow” or “cereals” working groups put in place crop rotations of wheat, pasture, fodder and buck wheat. One of the local farmers who has refused the compulsory purchase order suggests including some of his fields into the cycle, whilst some of the occupiers prepare an experiment with pulses and leguminous plants together with the dairy farmers of COPAIN. The result right now is that bit by bit we are collectively reclaiming 500 acres. We come together every week around what you might believe is a market – although nothing is sold and every thing is by donation, i.e people giving what they can – which enables us to open up to sharing some of the produce of the land. The surplus is used to feed other struggles, street kitchens or migrant squats in the city of Nantes.

A myriad of other experiences in autonomy are flowering, outside of the logic of management and the market. That which was already germinating before the evictions has taken on a new dimension. A sewing and textile workshop appears or a bike maintenance project, a place to make preserves, a micro brewery, a new bakers, a restaurant in a wooden carriage, a flour mill, a space for writing and recording rap songs, a dance hall and lessons in self defence... We are working on taking back control of our health via medicinal herb gardens and medical trainings, especially first aid for those injured by the police's weapons. We aim to build our own communication network, from our web site to the FM radio. Every week we put together a news letter, which brings together a calendar of events, minutes of meetings, stories and rants. It's delivered by “postmen” on foot or bikes, to the sixty places where people live on the zone. We explore different ways of partying, a million miles away from the trendy clubs and the entertainment industry: A festnoz (traditional breton dancing) to inaugurate the arrival of a new barn, which despite being banned by the authorities, made its way from the Finistère, on the far western edge of Brittany. To celebrate the end of the threshing season we hold a sixty metre long banquet amongst the hay bales and wheat dust. At night we fall into trance in barns covered in graffiti, to the sounds of experimental music or the bewitching voice of an opera singer... We look after parts of the hedgerows, the lanes, the electricity grid and the water supply via fairly regular collective work

12. Meaning the spice tumeric. Also a play on words, CUMA means “Coopérative d'Utilisation de Matériel Agricole” (Coopérative for Uses of Agricultural Equipment) and is a structure to mutualise equipment widely used amongst farmers.

days. We multiply the constructions, without any planning permission but with tonnes of architectural creativity, using recycled materials, earth, straw or even sometimes timber from trees felled on site and cut up a mobile saw mill some friends have brought halfway across France. We doggedly strive for ways to agree on the uses of our commons, expanding the possibilities of what could be shared and densifying the bonds that hold us.

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The autonomy that is being experimented in the bocage, can't be reduced to our food and material elements. We are not interested in self sufficiency for itself. What is happening here is political autonomy. What we are inventing, through trial and error, is the capacity to collectively decide our own rules. But the way they are established and evolve with the rhythm of our shared lives relates more to common uses and customs than any written laws of the Republic. The legitimacy upon which they hold is that of grounded life stories, of experience, nothing to do with any kind of transcendent belief — public interest incarnated by the state, the markets or divine will. A multitude of decision making spaces, of autonomous deliberations and organising have poured into the cracks that were opened up by the withdrawal of power, a power which is thus being sapped little by little.

Amongst these spaces are the weekly meetings of the occupiers and the assemblies of the movement, which follow one another with such a reliability that it resembles the steadfastness of traditional institutions. The official structures such as l'ACIPA, l'ADECA, COPAIN and certain local committees rub shoulders with more informal self organised groups, that converge and dissolve. To these decision making spaces one can add dozens of the living collectives where everyday life, love, friendship and political affinity is shared, and the beautiful encounters, the bedrock of daily solidarity that has held the zad together for so many years. Whether it's to do with life on the zad or demonstrations to keep the pressure on the airport builders, organising solidarity with Kurdish communes¹³ or with those charged for their actions against the agro-industrial farm of a thousand cows¹⁴, there are thousands of initiatives, some springing from a fireside chat, others from

13. The Kurdish revolution has created a *de facto* autonomous region in northern Syria, know as Rojovan, the West. The region gained its autonomy in November 2013 as part of the ongoing Rojava Revolution, establishing a society based on principles of direct democracy, gender equality, and sustainability.

14. 1000 cows farm is a mega farm project that has been fought by farmers and ecologists. In may 2014, members of the radical farmers trade union Confédération paysanne dismantled the milking hall and brought some of the elements to the Minister of Agriculture. They were sued and sentenced to suspended jail sentences.

a collective decision during an assembly. It is this constant effervescence that conspires against the possibility of taking power. It is what makes it impossible for an element of the struggle to become hegemonic, or that any leader holds in their hands both the fate and messaging of the movement.

“ I got used to this bubbling up, because there is a massive cauldron here, even if it has several fires under it, which don't even heat everything up at the same time... It would really piss me off if all this suddenly ended. We all want to see something come of it. I want this place to remain a nursery for other ways of thinking and living, that an experimental zone remains open and finds its own equilibrium, an area without control, without looking to make profit, somewhere unpoliced, a place where we recognise those whom we run into and where we say hello to each other. I will have won my personal struggle when we win that. This struggle must leave an open space, as wide open as possible.”
Dominique, from Notre-Dame-des-Landes and spokesperson for ACIPA.

There is something of the commune in what we are weaving together at la zad. Something of the Commune of 1871, when an irresistible collective feeling seized the inhabitants of Paris, who became, behind the barricades, masters of their own histories and daily life, giving rise to huge revolutionary hopes and sparking off uprisings in many other towns. There is something of the medieval communes who managed to rip themselves free from the grip of feudal power and defend the commons, these lands, tools and resources to be used in common with others. There is something of the short lived 1968 commune of Nantes, during which students and workers occupied the town hall, brought the region to a standstill and organised supplies for those on strike with local farmers. Something which, from now on, is both the means and the meaning of our struggle, and that we have to continue to deepen. These imaginaries feed the bogage of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in the quest for a desirable present and a possible future.

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Since 2013 we haven't stopped planning a future for the zad without an airport. From the collective construction days to the assemblies, during the sowing and harvesting, something is being born from our anchoring onto this territory. We do a survey of the land ownership to build a shared understanding of the situation between us. As the debates continue we move away from a strictly agricultural and legal approach to thinking together what our political objectives might be if we win.

In November 2015, after more than a year of discussions in all the organisational spaces of the movement, it's diverse elements make a shared commitment that will be decisive for the future. These are its terms:

Once the airport project is abandoned we want:

Once the airport project is abandoned we want:

1. That the inhabitants, owners or tenants who are part of a compulsory purchase or eviction order can remain on the zone and regain their rights.
2. That the impacted farmers resisting and refusing to bend to the will of AGO-Vinci, can continue to freely cultivate the lands that they use and recover their rights and pursue their work in good conditions.
3. That the new inhabitants who came to the zad to take part in the struggle can remain on the zone. That everything which has been build since 2007 as part of the occupation movement in terms of experiments in alternative agriculture, self-built homes or temporary dwellings (huts, yurts, caravans etc.) and forms of life and resistance, can stay and continue.
4. That the lands that each year are redistributed by the chamber of agriculture for AGO-Vinci's, in the form of precarious leases, are handled by a body that comes out of the resistance movement and brings together all its elements. So that it is the anti-airport movements rather than the normal institutions that decide on the uses of this land.
5. That these lands are for new agricultural or non agricultural projects, be they authorised or not, and not for the expansion of already existing farms.
6. That these agreements becomes a reality through our collective determination and that we carry together an attention to resolve all eventual conflicts linked to them being put in place. We are already sowing and building a future without an airport in our unity and diversity. It is up to all of us, from today, to enable it to flourish and to defend it.

In this autumn of 2015, it is no longer just about fighting against the building of an airport, nor against its accompanying world, but also to defend the possibility of sharing a common future on this bocage.



Keep the Bourget, we're taking Versailles. Long live the Commune!

It's the 28th of November 2015, the eve of COP21, the intergovernmental summit on climate change, we are in Versailles¹⁵. For weeks the government has repeatedly threatened that it will restart the building of the airport and that the zad, "this territory lost to the republic¹⁶", will be brought to an end. Whilst shamelessly in the same breath at the Bourget¹⁷ during the COP, the French state promotes its environmental concerns.

Since the Paris attacks of the 13th of November, with its declaration of a state of emergency, the government has considerably extended its control on the population. It conveniently profits from this opportunity to ban all street protests planned during the summit, and to launch a series of police raids and house arrests, including on people supporting the movement.

A week ago we left Notre-Dame-des-Landes together with five tractors, 200 cyclists ranging from 1 to 70 years old and a mobile kitchen. We are heading for the capital. Spurred on by the threat of new eviction attempts of the zad, we have decided to face the government with its own hypocrisy. The day after we took to the road we had to brave a police line and then a succession of bans on our progress towards Paris. We forged ahead regardless.

If the authorities did not want us, the opposite was true for those who lived in the regions we crossed. By the hundreds, they opened their houses, fields and municipal halls reminding us how vibrant this movement is way beyond the zad. These rebels did not offer up their hospitality simply as a gesture of support, but because they themselves are fighting locally – against the privatisation of their forests, so that migrants have a roof over their head, against an agro-industrial company or by resisting a new shopping mall by building a community garden in its

15. Famous palace on the edge of Paris, seat of absolute royal power from Louis XIV until the French revolution. Symbol of the oppression of ordinary people.

16. This is how the new president of the region, Senateur Bruno Retailleau, described the zad.

17. The private airport and conference centre on the outskirts of Paris where the COP21 was held.

way. By welcoming the convoy in the feverish climate that gripped the country, people found their own ways to disobey the iron fist deployed “against terrorism.” Other marches and convoys joined us en-route from other territories in struggle, from Bure where a nuclear dump is being planned to the free neighbourhood of the Lentillères in Dijon, from the fight against the high speed train around Agen to the marshes of Sivens or the forests of Roybon and Morvan¹⁸ Over the last three years the zad has become a rallying cry that echoes way beyond the bocage, and from which scores of living barricades are being born, built against those that want to manage our lives and lands.

Last night, meeting in a riding school arena, sitting on the sand or perching from the viewing gallery we decided that our venture would take us to Versailles. Ten days ago in this anachronistic citadel, seized by a bout of absolutism, the Senate and Parliament had a joint session to decide to prolong the state of emergency for a further three months.

We have been cycling since dawn, euphoric from the kilometres covered and the connections we wove throughout the week. The convoy comes to a stop just before Place d’armes, the magisterial square that leads up to the palace, and we march by foot together behind a huge banner painted the night before, and based on a Shakespearean verse: “And if we live, we live to tread on kings.”

Ringling the gates of the palace the police try once again to kettle us, this time around the statue of Louis the XVI. But we press on and they retreat, right up to the palace railings. Tables are unfolded in a circle to hold a gigantic shared banquet. The voice of one of the farmers, who came here in his tractor, rises above the crowd: “In 1871, the Versaillais crushed the Paris Commune¹⁹. Today the zads are like so many new free communes. And we declare here and now that these communes won’t allow themselves be evicted anymore.”

Amongst of us are two comrades, who despite the fact that they hardly knew each other before the start, rode together on a tandem - now they never leave each others’ sides. Whilst night falls, at the gates of the palace they sing together: “In ten years time the planes they wont be a flying” Everyone sings the chorus a little louder each time. “They can always dream of an their airport, I swear, but we’ve turned it into their very own nightmare.” Every one dances in a circle, bodies touching.

18. The Zad in Roybon (near Grenoble) is an occupation on the site of a Center Parcs that would threaten 400 acres of forest. In the Morvan (Centre of France), the struggle is against an industrial sawmill and a massive incinerator.

19. During the Commune of 1871, when the people of Paris kicked out the state and self managed the city for 3 months the government fled to Versailles on the edge of the city. It was from there that they launched the massacres that would kill 25,000 citizens of the commune in under a week of street fighting, and end modern Europe’s first great autonomous insurrection.

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We must defend the zad

To defend it as an experience and collective force of resistance set in a corner of a bocage which has brought together and inspired tens of thousands of people over the years. If they insist on returning we are calling for people to face up to them and defend the zone, tooth and nail, by blocking the entire region, by occupying institutions of power and holding banquets in the squares of their towns and villages. We call for the multiplication of actions to force the immediate abandonment of the airport project, and thus ensuring that this effervescent political experiment in the bocage carries on.

But we must also defend it as a historical possibility, that has already become contagious, that can be realised in a thousand different places, in a thousand different ways. We call for the spirit of the zad to continue to spread, taking a unique path every time, but with the desire to open cracks everywhere. Cracks in the frenzy of security measures, cracks in the ecological disaster, cracks in the tightening border regimes, cracks in the omnipotent surveillance, cracks in a world that puts everything up for sale.

In these disencharnted times, the zad and all that it represents, like the struggles of yesteryear and elsewhere, is a glimmer of hope in the here and now.

We must defend the zad,
in Notre-Dame-des-Lande
and everywhere.

A brief chronology

The 60's and 70's – Peasants against the politics of the desert. —

Born at the start of the 60's, the project to build an airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes immediately faces opposition from the agricultural world. L'ADECA²⁰, the Defence Association of farmers Concerned by the Airport Project, fight so that the zone remains cultivated and does not become deserted. In parallel action committees are formed in the surrounding villages. The ZAD, the official Zone of Deferred Planning is decreed in 1974 and covers 4000 acres. The project is put under wraps during the 80's and 90's .

The year 2000's “ Neither here nor anywhere!” —

The relaunch of the project in 2000 gives rise to the creation of ACIPA, the Intercommunal Citizens Association of People Concerned by the Airport (Association Citoyenne Intercommunale des Populations concernées par le projet d'Aéroport) The ACIPA leads a series of meticulous alternative studies and information sharing. In 2004 the Coordination of the opponents of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is born, today it brings together over 50 organisations, associations, political movements and trade unions. The ACIPA and the Coordination file several law suits against the project and mobilise people to participate in the debates and public enquiry; but in February 2008 the project is given planning permission and the go ahead.

2008 / 2010 – Zone À Défendre (Zone to defend) against the airport and it's world ! —

In 2008 the “Residents in Resistance” a group of people living on the zad decide to go beyond the purely legal strategies of ACIPA, and launch an invitation for people to come and “occupy the zad”. In the spring of 2009 the Climate Camp²¹ marks a stronger involvement of the radical ecology and anticapitalist currents in the movement. Little by little, new groups move into farms or build cabins, or join those at the Rosier which was the first squat to be opened on the zone in 2007.

2011 / 2012 – Vinci dégage²², résistance et sabotage... (Vinci get out! Resistance and sabotage!) —

20. Association de Défense des Exploitants Concernés par le projet d'Aéroport

21. Originating in the UK in 2006.

22. Get lost ! Get out of here. It was the slogan of the Tunisian revolution, similar to the Que se vayan Todos of the Argentine uprising, meaning all politicians must go.

parade through the zad armed with pitch forks and clear a plot to install the market garden le Sabot²³. The contract to build the airport is given to the multinational Vinci. With the permanent presence of the occupiers on the zad, resistance and acts of sabotage proliferate against preliminary works and the companies attempting to undertake them. In the spring of 2012, there are numerous court cases to evict the occupiers and their homes. Compulsory purchase orders and financial offers are made to land owners, tenants and farmers who either crack under the pressure or hold on. On the 24th of March over 10,000 people and more than 200 tractors parade through Nantes bringing with it a bit of the bocage. A few weeks later protesters initiate a hunger strike that keeps going right up to the Presidential elections. As a result the government promises not to evict the legal inhabitants and farmers before a certain number of court cases have been resolved.

October / November 2012 – Cesar’s defeat. — On the 16th of October *Operation Cesar* begins, involving up to 2000 police officers for several weeks. A dozen houses and cabins are knocked down, but the occupants resist and remain in place, bolstered by the surge of solidarity in the region and across the whole of France. Over 200 support committees are set up. On the 17th of November a reoccupation demonstration attracts over 40,000 people and results in the construction in two days of new buildings for the struggle: The Chat-teigne hamlet. The 23rd and 24th of November hundreds of police try to take back the Chat-teigne and evict the tree houses. The region’s major highways are blocked and thousands of people fight in the streets of Nantes and the forest of Rohanne. On the night of the 24th, the government calls off *Operation Cesar* and sets up a dialogue commission. The following day, 40 tractors chain themselves together encircling the Chat-teigne. Simultaneously the police begin their permanent presence at the zad’s crossroads that lasts 5 months. Dozens of new people move to the zone and a spirited period of construction begins.

2013 – Free Zone — In January, COPAIN, which brings together farmers engaged in the struggle, occupies Bellevue farm and its lands. In April, unsurprisingly the commission of dialogue announces that the airport will happen notwithstanding a few improvements. Two days later, the police occupation that has become unbearable ends and several thousand people come to help set up dozens of new agricultural projects during the “Sow your zad” (“Sème ta zad”)

23 Another word game, Sabot meaning clog, but clearly referencing the origins or the word Sabotage, which meant to literally throw one’s clogs into the machines to stop them.

action. Mass events: the festivad, huge picnics and a human chain succeed one another. Life on the ground and the relationships with the neighbours changes with a good deal of sometimes very strained discord as well as beautiful encounters. The powerlessness of the state and Vinci on the ground is borne out by the fact that judicial decrees are systematically ignored and any attempt at works sabotaged.

2014 – zad everywhere! — During the winter the contractors take the bull by the horns and announce the relocation of protected species and the start of construction. On the 22nd of February, in response over 50,000 people and 500 tractors swamp Nantes and multiple clashes with the police who block the way into the town centre ensue. Despite the resulting mainstream media backlash and internal tensions, on the territory the movement reaffirms its togetherness. The government backs down and delays the start of works again.

The 25th of October, Remi Fraise's murder by the police during clashes on the zad of the Testet in the Tarn, kicks off a wave of demonstrations across the country, they are severely repressed. Zads proliferate, opposing the developments of our territories into machines of the markets. On the other side and in the wake of the security measures post the Charlie Hebdo attacks of January 11th, business, the government and their accomplices in the agro-industrial farmers union the FNSEA, organise against us.

2015 – The future faced with threats — In the autumn of 2015, the prime minister stubbornly asserts his will to see through the building of the airport. The court cases begin again to speed up the eviction of farmers and tenants who have remained on the zad. On the 22nd of September barricades return to the zone, blocking all the entrances for an entire day to stop the visits from a judge and the police come to enforce the compulsory purchase orders. In November a convoy of bikes and tractors leaves Notre-dame-des-Landes and arrives in Versailles on the eve of COP21 despite bans and the state of emergency.

On the 31st of January, the “historic ” local farmers and residents of the zad, (I.e those who have been resisting over the long term) are summoned to court. Vinci asks for their immediate eviction, draconian daily fines if they refuse and the possibility of seizing their assets and livestock. Faced with this threat a demonstration is organised within 10 days. On the 9th of January, 20,000 people, hundreds of bikes and 400 tractors converge on Nantes' ring road and occupy the huge

Chéviré bridge. At 10pm the police evacuate the tractors and demonstrators that remain on the bridge demanding the abandonment of all the court cases. Several days of action follow with slow downs and blockades of highways across the region. Dozens of demonstrations, actions and sabotages take place throughout France. On the 25th of January the Judge orders the eviction of the farmers and residents of the zad, but does not impose the fines. Meanwhile the government, feeling the pressure, announces via the prime minister that the real start of the building will be once a gain pushed back this time to autumn 2016, whilst the environment minister declares that there cannot be a eviction by force of the zad without the risk of “a civil war”. The mobilisations continue !

On the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, you can count over 60 living spaces and hundreds of acres reclaimed from Vinci are now cultivated. The protesters – farmers, inhabitants and occupiers – draw up the foundations for a common future and the continuation of a free zone.



To go further

More information, writings and events about the struggle:

The site of the occupiers movement. <https://zad.nadir.org>

<https://www.acipa-ndl.fr/>

<https://naturalistesenlutte.wordpress.com/>

On Mauvaise troupe's site <https://constellations.boum.org>, you'll find :

A series of interviews with people resisting on the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and in the Susa Valley against the Lyon-Turin High Speed Train, in the form of printable and downloadable pamphlets.

A selection of subjective writings from the anti-airport movement, on the evictions, stories of fights against the progress of the project and tools with which to think a future without an airport and questioning the concept of the commune.

Feel free to start or join a local support committee.

There are numerous opportunities to visit the zad, for collective work days, parties, workshops, banquets and actions.

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Photos 1 & 4 are from Valk
(bonpiedboneil.net), 2, 3 & 5
from Philippe Graton.

Something is flowering in the forest, fields and hedgerows, of the bocage of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. Nestled in a landscape that remains under threat by the building of a new airport, an experimental zone is proliferating, it's called - La zad.

Since the victorious resistance to the 2012 wave of evictions, the zad has become a rallying cry, inspiring a multitude of other nodes of disobedience. The French government has announced that the riot police might return to the territory and the process of compulsory purchases has begun again. This text is an echo of this political adventure and passionately calls for us all to defend the zad.

La Mauvaise Troupe is an ever mutating collective that formed during the editing of the book *Constellations: Revolutionary trajectories of the young 21st century*, published by Eclat, in 2014. This spring the collective will publish their second work, on the similar and kindred stories of the zad of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in North Western France and the No-TAV resistance to the high speed train project in the Valley de Susse, northern Italy.

www.lyber-eclat.net

<https://constellations.boum.org>