

Land Grabbing in France:

The case of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport

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A highly disputed and much-resisted project to build an airport in rural France provides an excellent example of the recent phenomenon of land grabbing. The takeover of 2,000 hectares (ha) of agricultural land for this project demonstrates one of the ways in which large corporations are currently both seizing physical land and also the power over how it is used. This takeover, which is achieved through a revolving-door configuration between government and corporations, embodies the problem of arable lands being diverted to industrial and urban uses.

The project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport

Although reported only relatively recently in the national news, the controversies surrounding the plan to build the Grand Ouest airport north of the city of Nantes have been going on for more than 40 years. First designed in 1967, the project has been the subject of debate ever since. The issue took a new turn in 2008 with the granting of building permission, and in 2011, with the publicity surrounding farmers squatting on the land in protest.

The new, two-runway, Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport, also known as the Aéroport du Grand Ouest (Great West) would be situated 30km northwest of Nantes, near the country's Atlantic coast.¹ The main stakeholders, including the world's biggest building corporation, Vinci,² the French government, and to some extent the aviation industry,³ hope to make this Europe's western-most airport, taking over some of Heathrow's stopover capacity. It would then become a central transfer hub for international flights in northern France. Its final building permit was delivered in 2008 – signed by the then Prime Minister and the Minister of Environment – and the airport is planned to be operational by 2017/2018.⁴ The airport involves capital investments totalling €580 million. The construction of side roads and other necessary infrastructure brings the total to €4 billion (Porquet, 2008).

The main arguments in favour of the airport are the usual economic claims that its construction will attract investors and tourists to the area, stimulating the local economy. Vinci promises in its promotional flyer 'Aéroport Grand Ouest in ten bullet points' to make the region a 'great European region' by making it more easily accessible.

Vinci's way

Many facts cast doubt on the validity and appropriateness of this airport. First, the overall economic gain, using the monetary values assigned to such factors as time saved in travel, the environmental impact, and the attractiveness of the region, was grossly overestimated, as were the prospects for air-traffic growth in the Nantes region, given the current state of the economy and the increasing cost of fossil fuel. Furthermore, the total cost of the project, including its ancillary projects, such as roads and public transport, was significantly understated (La Zad, 2012a). All the arguments used by successive

national and local governments regarding passenger numbers, aircraft rotations, safety, noise pollution, employment and the new High Environmental Quality project, have been discredited by a number of independent assessments that contradict the official analysis (de Ruelle, 2012). For instance, Vinci's estimation of skyrocketing passenger flows is highly contested in view of the fact that smaller airports in France and the UK are currently being forced to close due to a lack of demand.

Worse still, the government has refused to consider the less invasive alternatives to this project, such as renovating the existing airport in Nantes, which in September 2012 received the airline companies' ERA Award 2011–2012 for best European airport.⁵ This is all the more unfortunate considering that the region is known to have some of the most pristine biodiversity in France (ACEMAV-BIOTOPE, 2002).

Deeper investigation has revealed the government's bias towards Vinci through the revolving door and conflicts of interest. For instance, the Loire-Atlantic Regional Prefect for the 2007–2009 period, Bernard Hagelsteen, under whose mandate the brief to tender for projects for the new airport was drawn up in 2008, started working for Vinci in 2011. His wife, president of the government commission approving public construction projects, also received a very high civil distinction (de Ruelle, 2012).

Finally, in terms of serving the interests of the local elite, the relocation of the airport some 30km away from the city centre would create space near Nantes for the continued gentrification of the city. Indeed, some of the 'security and sound belt areas' of the current Nantes airport would become wealthy neighbourhoods (La Zad, 2012b), pushing lower and middle-class families further towards the outskirts of the city.

Peoples' resistance

Local farmers and activists have been united in the resistance against this outdated airport project.⁶ ADECA (*l'Association de Défense des Exploitants Concernés par l'Aéroport*), the local farmers' organisation against the airport, was founded in 1972. The citizens' initiative, ACIPA (*Association Citoyenne Intercommunale des Populations concernées par le projet d'Aéroport de Notre Dame des Landes*),⁷ created in 2000, works closely with the various local actors contesting the project. Many of these have joined the struggle more recently, such as the Cédpa (*Collectif d'élus doutant de la pertinence de l'aéroport de Notre-Dame-des-Landes*)⁸ and the protestors squatting illegally on the land. Since 2008, when Vinci was granted the final authorisation and started the land expropriations (which had been approved by the government in 2003), the resistance has been constantly growing. Long-standing protesters have now been joined by new arrivals, who are supporting the struggle by occupying abandoned houses on the affected land.

Renaming it *Zone à Défendre* (Zone to Defend), activists, farmers and local residents of the ZAD (originally meaning the *Zone d'Aménagement Différé*, or Deferred Development Zone) have been resisting the development of the airport by occupying land expropriated by the state on behalf of Vinci. The squatters call themselves '*zadistas*'. There is currently very little land 'available for squatting' – only around 300 ha by early 2013 – since some farmers have agreed to leave. In 2012, squatters occupied only a few hectares. There are also many houses still rented or owned by people who refuse to leave and who have not yet had their homes expropriated.

Together with those about to lose their homes and land, moving into abandoned houses or making their own huts and fortified tree camps, the *zadistas*, activists from all across France and many parts of the world, have been taking over sites purchased by the council to make way for the airport, and transforming them into living examples of the alternative world in which they want to live. In addition to

housing space, squatters have set up a bakery, a bicycle workshop, a collective kitchen, an internet café and a radio station. Very few farmers, mainly small to average dairy producers, have stopped running their farms. Although municipality of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and surrounding municipalities do not support the new airport, they are not in favour of the squatters.

The activists who are illegally occupying the zone and the locals resisting the pressure to sell their land criticise the increase in CO₂ emissions due to the increasing air traffic (Collectif SUDAV, 2011: 65). They also object to the fact that public money would be invested in increasing private profit, while the government is slashing social spending in order to reduce the national debt. Beyond these considerations, they are first and foremost promoting an agricultural model based on local small-scale farming. Their goal is to fight against land grabbing, privatisation, speculation and commercial profiteering for the benefit of a few. They reject any new concrete deserts and agro-industrial wastelands (Collectif SUDAV, 2011: 65).

In June 2011, Vinci began eviction procedures in order to have the legal means to remove those occupying the ZAD who have no rights or titles to the land. The evictions began in October 2012. By January 2013, 13 homes had been destroyed. Tenants, landowners and farmers have been forced to sell their land and been threatened with eviction. There has been a huge range of actions to resist the expulsion. For example, in April 2012 two farmers and a political representative went on hunger strike (La Via Campesina, 2012), which resulted in a small victory for the farmers; they won the right to stay on their land until all legal procedures have come to an end, which will probably be March 2013.

People who have been renting houses from the city council and now from Vinci are under pressure to move, but most of them are still there and do not wish to leave. Since October 2012, the French military police, whom the *zadistas* perceive as an occupying force, have been a constant presence at the ZAD. Operating on behalf of Vinci, they resort to violence on a daily basis. Hundreds of people have been injured, some seriously. There has been a systematic use of sting-ball grenades, which can cause injuries similar to gunshot wounds, and extensive use of tear gas, which can result in respiratory problems. Two people have been imprisoned.

Farmers and activists demand the withdrawal of the military police from the ZAD and an immediate halt to the airport project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. With the increasing pressure and police violence, the resistance is marked by huge diversity and creativity, which, after some hesitation, resulted in broad media coverage and prompted many organisations and politicians to take a position regarding the airport (Ody and Dreyer, 2012). Their battle is a key step in the fight for the right to be self-reliant in food and against exploitation and a neoliberal development model that re-shapes rural areas.

References

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Endnotes

1. More information about the project is available at: <http://aeroport-grandouest.fr/faq/>.
2. Vinci is a French concessions and construction company, formerly called Société Générale d'Enterprises. It employs over 179,000 people and in terms of revenue is the world's largest construction company.
3. A full list of those involved in the construction of the airport is available at: <http://acipa.free.fr/Plus/Documents/acipa/acipa.htm/>.
4. More information on the schedule is available at: <http://aeroport-grandouest.fr/blog/2010/04/07/calendrier-previsionnel/>.
5. More information about the award is available at: <http://www.eraa.org/about/awards-a-honours/599-previous-winners-airports/>.
6. A summary document is available at: <http://acipa.free.fr/Plus/Documents/acipa/acipa.htm/>.
7. Citizens' Intercommunal Association of Populations Affected by the Notre Dame des Landes Airport Project.
8. Collective of Councillors Doubting the Relevance of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport. More information is available at: <http://aeroportnddl.fr/>.