

September 28th 2014

Dear neighbours,

You have probably had a letter from the *Conseil général du Tarn* about the *barrage du Testet*, the dam it plans to build in the Forêt de Sivens near Gaillac. Signed by the President Thierry Carcenac, it indignantly describes what it calls « illegal occupation » of the woods, « violent protests » and even « the ransacking » of the Conseil général's offices which left employees « in a state of shock ». Wow! Who *are* these these fanatical ecologists?

Ahum... Well actually they are your nextdoor neighbours. We've been protesting against this dam for weeks; here is why.

The 8,4 millions project (public funds only) consists of a dam and an artificial lake. These will cover 30 hectares which implies the destruction of the Testet wetland, a well-known biodiversity hotspot, and the protected woodland of the *Forêt de Sivens*. The *Conseil général* argues that the dam is necessary for irrigation and to anticipate on future water shortages resulting from climate change. The problem is that all the surveys were done by the *Compagnie d'Aménagement des Coteaux de Gascogne* (CACG)<sup>1</sup>, the company in charge of building the dam. An independent enquiry might have shown that the needs for irrigation have been overrated, and the surface of land requiring irrigation have been doubled in the reports. Also, in the context of climate change, it might have shown that destroying a wetland to replace it by corn production is probably the worst possible option, corn relying on fossil fuels and huge amounts of water and chemicals. But it is well-known that - particularly in Southwestern France – the powerful FNSEA union of agribusiness - usually gets it way, its interests being upheld by local politicians<sup>2</sup>.

In 2013 the Conseil National de Protection de la Nature, a consultative body for the Ministry of the Environment, assessed the project negatively: the environmental costs are too high, particularly in terms of destruction of animal life (94 protected species). The Testet Collectif has suggested several alternative schemes and associations of the France Nature Environnement federation have pursued the CACG in court on several irregularities. But the *Conseil général* refuses all public debate on the subject and rushed ahead to begin the work in early September before the courts had judged the case<sup>3</sup>.

From early september on, dozens – and sometimes hundreds – of us, people of all ages from Vaour, Penne, Saint Antonin, Milhars or Cordes, have been to the Forêt de Sivens to join the handful of protestors occupying the site since last year, some of them committed activists from the Nantes movement against the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport. We tried using passive resistance to stop the work, some people climbing to occupy trees. The Tarn *prefecture* sent in approx. 200 *gardes-mobiles* who surrounded the woodland and used violence indiscriminately on all protestors.

For days a mist of tear gas floated over the woods where Moroccan workers with chainsaws (who barely understood French, which prevented any communication) and gigantic tree fellers destroyed the centennial oaks of the Sivens forest. On Sept. 8th, in a desperate attempt to stop these machines,

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1 Whose administrative board includes several local conseillers généraux.

2 Hence the fact that angry FNSEA farmers can regularly smash prefectures gates and empty trucks of manure without never being criticised for its « violent » and « intolerable behaviour ».

3 Several dams were built and later judged illegal by the courts: i.e in the Tarn, the Fouragues dam upon the Vere near Carmaux, built in 1997, made illegal in 1998 and still functioning despite this.

a group of young protestors buried themselves in the ground, only their heads visible, facing the *gardes-mobiles*. As soon as the journalists and Red Cross delegates left, the police fired teargas towards these demonstrators, trod on them and proceeded through the woods, sending one girl to hospital. Later, unwilling to confront police brutality alone in the woods, protestors went to demonstrate at the Conseil général in Albi where they were once again removed by force.

Despite the violence of the *gardes-mobiles*, despite the destruction of the forest (very damaged during the first part of the work), the ZAD<sup>4</sup> is still going on there and we are determined to stop the building of the dam. In several villages, local collectives have been created, such as in Vaour. Among other events, a public « family » meeting takes place on the site every Sunday afternoon - food or blankets or tools for the people living there are more than welcome – and a national demonstration will take place on the 24th-26<sup>th</sup> of October.

This land is your land (as Woodie Guthrie said). Help us protect local biodiversity, a sustainable small-scale agriculture and our well-loved landscapes !

The Vaour area collective.

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4 A sit-in, nicknamed ZAD (Zone A Défendre, territory to defend) after the Nantes occupation against the building of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport.