

MAY 1968 IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

SIMON FAIRLIE examines how 'the events' changed French rural politics.

*"Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven."*

These words, written by William Wordsworth about the French revolution, have an uncanny ring for many of us who fifty years ago saw uprisings roll across Europe and beyond. 1968 did indeed look like a new dawn, even viewed from the relative torpor of Great Britain. In particular it was the May '68 movement in France that captured the spirit of the time, through its vigour, its audacity and its bid to reach beyond the parameters of conventional left wing resistance. "Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible" the graffiti urged, and so that was what we demanded, and for a time even expected.

Coverage of the events inevitably focused on Paris, but the movement was by no means confined to the metropolis. It was nationwide. Between 24 and 28 May alone, demonstrations were recorded in 96 provincial towns. Between 22 and 26 May there were 52 protests by farmers in 30 *départements*, most of them situated on an axis of rural resistance that stretches from Perpignan on the Mediterranean, through the Massif Central to Brittany.

These agricultural protests did not happen out of the blue; they weren't just copycat versions of what was happening in Paris. They were an episode in ongoing struggles that had been pursued by French farmers for many years before 1968, and were to continue long after.



This poster from 1968 promoting solidarity between workers and peasants adorns the cover of a new book by Jean-Philippe Martin called *Des Mai 68 dans les Campagnes Françaises?*, from which much of the material in this article is drawn.

The Build-Up

There were two main centres of rural resistance. One of these was in the Languedoc, the wine growing area around Montpellier, where the *vignerons* (wine farmers) were fighting a dual battle, firstly against the French wine elite in Burgundy and Bordeaux, whose rules dictated that farmers in Mediterranean areas should only produce *pinard* – cheap wine for urban plebs; and secondly against imports of even cheaper wine from Algeria and Italy. Throughout 1967 there were violent demonstrations in Draguignan, Carcassonne and Montpellier, culminating in a mass mobilisation of thousands in November, when blockades were mounted across railway lines, and a bomb was planted in a lock on the Canal du Midi.

The other centre of peasant resistance was in the west, notably Brittany, where small farmers raising livestock and growing vegetables pursued a dogged campaign against volatile commodity prices. The peasants here were more successful than the Languedoc *vignerons* at making alliances with unions representing other industries. In April 1965 several thousand workers and farmers marched through Paris behind the slogan "The West Wants to Live". In October 1967 the farmers staged demonstrations at Quimper, Redon and Le Mans against a collapse in the price of pork and chicken, and imports of cheap beef, denouncing "a liberalised

Europe where capitalists cream off the profits". Once again railways were blockaded, violence erupted and after a battle that lasted two hours, the press reported that 279 people were injured. The French establishment was alarmed. The Public Prosecutor of the region wrote in a report:

"The peasant demonstrations of 2 October have made an impression on the industrial and metallurgical workers at Le Mans . . . especially at the publicly owned company Renault, not least because many of the workers are of rural origin and have relatives who work the land. This is leading them to emulate the forceful and determined methods of the peasants."



Paris 1968. These smart young men are passing *pavés* (granite paving stones) along the chain to fortify the barricades. It was said that beneath the *pavés* lay the beach — but many *soixante-huitards* were to put down roots in the countryside.

At the end of the year the farmers' and other unions of the west of France began to plan a mass action involving peasants and industrial workers, with the date fixed, prophetically, for 8 May 1968.

Nantes 68

Protests continued throughout the early part of 1968. On 26 January, strikers from Renault's Saviem lorry factory at Caen, together with left wing students, clashed with the police. On the same day at Fougères in Brittany, peasant unions joined other workers in an attempt to storm the district council buildings in a protest against redundancies. In March at Redon, farmers, workers and students joined forces in another violent protest. At Nantes, students led by a situationist/anarchist faction that had been fighting a repressive university administration for nearly a year, combined with workers to stage a series of demonstrations in December '67 and January '68.

Then on 14 February, 1500 students carrying black and red flags and singing the Internationale marched through Nantes to the university rector's headquarters. A number of them occupied his office, ripping up the curtains, raiding the fridge and pissing on the carpet. After negotiating with the Prefect, Jean-Emile Vié, to be allowed to leave peacefully, they were beaten up on the his orders by baton-wielding police as soon as they were outside. According to Sarah Guilbaud, author of a book about the events in Nantes, "May 68 began at Nantes in April 67".

Turmoil in Paris itself was kicked off 10 weeks later by students at Nanterre University who had been protesting for some months because they were forbidden to sleep with each other. On 2 May the government shut down Nanterre University and next day police occupied the Sorbonne. On 6 May there were riots involving some 20,000 students and teachers. A mass mobilisation was scheduled for 10 May, subsequently known as "the night of the barricades".

Meanwhile the protests planned in the west of the country for 8 May went ahead in 16 towns. Attendance was patchy in some places, probably because peasants' and workers' unions still had reservations about working together. But in Nantes several thousand workers and peasants congregated under a banner proclaiming "land to the tiller". They were addressed by, among others, Bernard Lambert, a local farmer who was to become an inspirational leader for the peasant movement. They were joined by the students who had gone on strike because their union had been shut down by the Prefect in response to "insults" in a pamphlet circulating amongst students entitled *The Rector and his Cops*. A tract handed out by students at the demonstration proclaimed solidarity with "peasants threatened by land-grabbers who want to take away their right to work."

The demonstration passed off peacefully, but on the 13 May, in response to police repression in Paris, the Nantes students called a demonstration in which an estimated 20,000 people marched on the Prefecture, throwing stones at the windows. The police responded with tear gas, the demonstrators returned fire with Molotov cocktails, and burned the Prefect's car. In



Bernard Lambert speaking on 24 May 1968 in the newly renamed Place du Peuple in Nantes. The middle banner reads "No to the capitalist regime; yes to a complete revolution of society."

a panic the Prefect phoned Paris asking permission to allow the police to open fire on the students, but he was refused. Had permission been given, who knows what direction events might have taken?

The next day employees of Sud Aviation in Nantes (which among other things manufactured Concorde) occupied the factory, welding up the doors so that no one could go in or out. This was the first factory in France to be occupied during the May events. It evolved into something approaching a general strike in Nantes, and a central strike committee was formed with a view to providing food brought in by militant farmers and other necessities to occupied sites.

On 20 May Bernard Lambert addressed several hundred students at the Faculty of Letters, where he was warmly applauded. Then on 24 May, as part of a National Day of Action called by agricultural unions, there was another demonstration in Nantes, this time spearheaded by peasants arriving in tractors and spreading manure in the streets. The Place Royale was renamed the Place du Peuple. "We must challenge capitalist society and the liberalised Europe it has given rise to" said Lambert. The crowd responded with a "nuit rouge", erecting barricades, ripping up paving stones and setting fire to the Prefecture.

Inevitably the revolution peaked towards the end of May and then petered out over the month of June, in Nantes as it did in Paris. Many mainstream unions, including the main agricultural union FNSEA (Fédération Nationale des Syndicats D'Exploitants Agricoles) were fairweather sailors, voicing guarded support for the movement at its height, then denouncing it as soon as support appeared to be waning. The majority of peasants did not support the militants, or did not understand what was happening. President de Gaulle, who had fled to Germany with his family jewels, returned (without the jewels) and called a general election for June 23 which he won convincingly. The students left Paris for the summer saying that it would all start up again in October – but it didn't.

As Alain Geismar, one of the student leaders, remarked, May 68 may have been a failure as political revolution, but as a social revolution it was a success. Long after the action had fizzled out, cultural shock waves rebounded around France

and across Europe. France would never be the same again: and if change in the countryside wasn't immediately discernible, it was only a matter of a few years before it became manifest.

The Milk Strike

In the years immediately after 1968 it was business as usual for the radical peasant organisations, but it was not long before their campaigns began to take on a new complexion. In the west the peasants stepped up campaigns against *cumulards*, landgrabbers who acquired farms and properties and expelled tenant farmers, either to swell their already large agricultural holdings, or else to take the land out of agriculture. Between 1968 and 1978 there were 110 actions involving land occupations, disruption of auctions, destruction of fences and other illegal tactics.

Then in 1972 dairy farmers in Brittany embarked on what they termed a "milk strike", refusing to deliver milk to the processors. They were protesting against low prices which (as today in Britain) often did not meet the costs of production,

Three Contemporaries Reminisce

The Rural Enragé

I was 20 years old. My generation grew up to see French rural culture swept aside by consumerism and industrialisation — tractors replaced horses, kids went to lycée instead of working on the farm, pop music ousted the accordion. As teenagers we were thirsty for ideas — we looked across the Atlantic to the beat generation and the anti-war movement. Mao's cultural revolution inspired the pupils in my six form to dress entirely in red — the teacher went mad and broke one kid's specs.

When students occupied Nanterre, my girlfriend's mother lent us a Ford Taunus to drive up to Paris. We leapt over the barriers of the Metro without paying. The walls were covered with slogans: "No to consumer society!" "Tout, tout de suite!" (Everything, Immediately!). We went to meetings with striking workers — then we went fishing for frogs to eat in some ponds on the outskirts. The climax was the 10 May with barricades, burnt out cars, the streets stripped of paving stones, 800,000 people in the streets denouncing De Gaulle and the consumer society. Public opinion supported us — but then the tide turned and De Gaulle regained control.

What did it all achieve? New freedoms, women's lib, better conditions for workers, yes! But the consumer society we decried remains intact — the countryside is dying, the farmer alone with his stereo in his air-conditioned tractor cultivates hundreds of hectares, while the bulk of humanity is crammed into megacities where all you can do is buy stuff. But the spirit of 68 lives on. The other day I spotted this slogan outside a supermarket in a small country town:

Jean-Yves Bousserreau, a retired shepherd, goatherd and cheese-maker, from the south west of France.

The Curious English Kid

I was 17 when I went on the two big Grosvenor Square Vietnam demos in October 67 and March 68. I was expelled from my grammar school for going to the second — a teacher spotted me in a photo in the *Times*. I also went on a demo in London in support of the German students in April, but I don't remember any actions to support the French revolt; I watched it on the news, fascinated.

In June, I set off to France hitch-hiking to see what it was all about, but I was too late. I went to the Odéon in Paris where the debates happened. It was still technically occupied, but it was like a seaside town in winter — just one or two people packing things up.

The best bit was hitching across France down to the South. It was really easy to get lifts and as soon as I got in everybody talked enthusiastically about "the events". Only one elderly couple opposed the movement: they picked me up because they thought from my long hair that I was a girl.

One couple gave me a complete set of thirty different silk-screened posters — all the classics you can now see on the internet. Regrettably, I sold them in a flea market a few years later when I was broke. Everyone said the struggle would start up again in October, but it didn't.

The Sceptical Anarchist

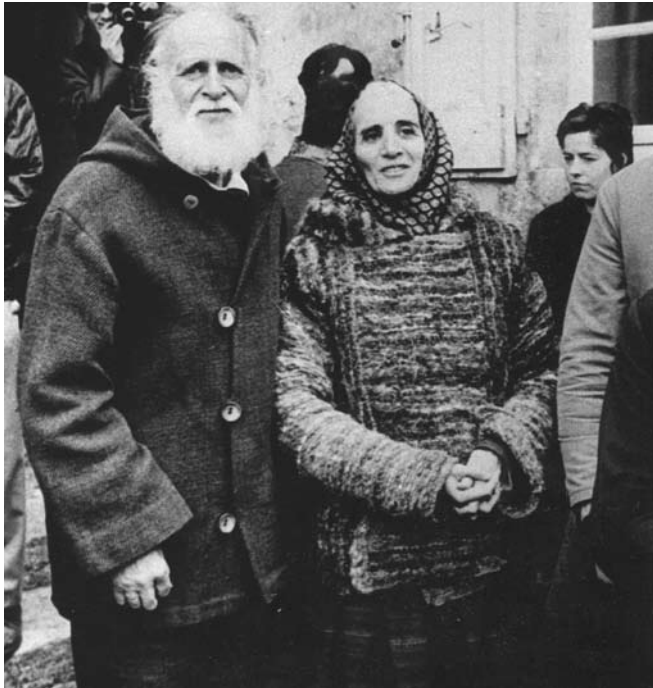
I was 23, studying Architecture in Belgium. I came to Paris, where my parents lived, on a long weekend from 10 to 13 June, and didn't know anybody there. I wandered from one place to another, taking in the atmosphere, but with no illusions about the revolutionary potential. At the Beaux-Arts, where architecture was taught, the level of the demands was pretty disappointing. The students wanted subjects such as sociology, social psychology and political economy integrated into the curriculum, in short to broaden the outlook. I thought this was a bit pathetic, as it was up to them to expand their horizons, not their teachers. Anyway it wasn't very interesting as we'd already been through all this at my college in Belgium.

I moved on to see what the intellectuals of the movement were saying. I participated in hours and hours of entertaining but sterile debate, mostly at the Odéon and the Sorbonne. I was sickened by the expulsion of Jean-Louis Barrault from his own theatre in an atmosphere akin to the Maoist cultural revolution. I became a disillusioned spectator, staying away from the violent demonstrations, watching them in black and white on my parents TV. Bear in mind that I wasn't a bourgeois reactionary at the time — I was an active supporter of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT — and I'm still a sympathiser 50 years on.

Claude Micmacker, an architect and founder of the Ecocentre du Périgord in south west France.



Work, Consume and Shut up.



Lanzo del Vasto (with his wife) on hunger strike at the Larzac — a gesture which set the tone for a campaign against the military that remained consistently peaceful.

while the price of milk in the shops continued to rise. “The farmer grafts, the consumer pays and the processor profits” was their slogan. Processing factories, both private and co-operative were blockaded or occupied, milk lorries hijacked and their contents poured onto the road, directors of factories heckled, jostled or held hostage. Although the movement remained fundamentally non-violent, local branches of the FNSEA were divided as to whether to support the strike. The French government refused to negotiate, suggesting that the campaign was led by Maoists “more interested in what happens in Peking than in Brittany”. But after ten days some processors cracked and the farmers secured a better price.

The milk strike has been identified as signalling a change in peasant tactics. By choosing to call it a strike, its instigators were using terminology borrowed from the workers and students. In the manner of May 68, decisions were made in mass meetings rather than by a committee of union officials. The campaign’s radical edge, and its willingness to target co-operatives, split the mainstream union movement in the west of France, which never really recovered.

Particularly interesting was the prominent role taken by women who were often the family member who milked the cows. One of the most vocal leaders of the strike was a farmer called Marie-Renée Morvan, known to the press as La Chinoise, because she had spent six weeks in communist China (she died in 2009 on a trip to Gaza with the Association France Palestine Solidarité).

On 23 May a mob of 400 women occupied the directors’ office at a co-operative in Landerneau while another thousand demonstrated at Quimper — and on 28 May, Mothers’ Day, 1,000 women and children marched through Brest. Husbands stayed on the farm carrying out the traditionally female tasks, so that their wives could attend. The women accused the

processors and middlemen of relying on unpaid family labour, the relic of a former subsistence economy, to keep prices low in a competitive market economy. As one put it:

“I’m not just a farmer’s wife, I am a worker in my own right, and as such I am entitled to a salary. When they drop the price of milk it is me above all who they rob.”

In one sense it wasn’t really a strike, since the peasants still had to work and to milk their cows. But what was to be done with the milk? Some was sold locally to neighbours, and in order to preserve the rest, the farmers hauled butter churns out of storage and put them back to work. “That was why the strike did not cause economic problems for the farmers” a union official recollected later, adding “it was like a permanent festival, and the local bars had never seen such good business.” Local pigs no doubt did well out of it too.

Montredon — An Ugly Battle

Meanwhile, the Languedoc vignerons were fighting a desperate battle to save their industry. Power to make decisions had been transferred from Paris to Brussels, where the concerns of French wine-growers counted for little. In the interests of so-called “comparative advantage” the EEC decreed that Italy should export wine, fruit and tomatoes, while France would supply milk and cereals. Meanwhile the urban working class for whom the cheap wine was destined were acquiring more expensive tastes. Competition was increasing while the market was shrinking.

Direct action against wine imports became increasingly frequent and audacious. Commando groups of militants would hijack tankers or break into warehouses and empty them of wine, sometimes using explosives, or carrying hunting rifles. On 1 March 1976, 80,000 litres of Italian wine were destroyed in a warehouse belonging to Ramel, a notorious importer. When the Interior minister Michel Poniatowski had two *vignerons* arrested and charged, some 2,000 farmers went on a rampage blowing up or trashing any public building they could find: railway stations, motorway service stations, tax offices and radio masts.

On 4 March a large group of protesters, some armed, blockaded the Route Nationale 113 at Montredon, near Narbonne. Poniatowski ordered his CRS riot police to disperse them through “a brief and violent operation”. A 20 minute shoot-out ensued in which the police used automatic pistols; at the end of it Joël Le Goff, a CRS commander, and Emile Pouytes, a *vigneron*, both lay dead.

Montredon was a turning point for the movement. The violence scuppered any chances of gaining support from the media, from other unions or from potential sympathisers in other regions. Later in the year Christian Bonnet, minister for agriculture announced:

When I am asked to support the production of gutrot plonk (*affreuses bibines*) at a rate of 20 tonnes to the hectare of heavily irrigated land in the plains, I refuse . . . If some producers of bad wine need to die, I say let them die.”

This was hardly a justification for importing more plonk from Italy — but nonetheless it hit home. Henceforth go-ahead young *vignerons* found it more profitable to invest their energy in improving the quality of their wine, by planting better varieties and harvesting fewer grapes. Wines from the region such as Faugères, Fitou and St Chinian began to gain a reputation.

Larzac — A Beautiful Fight



Larzac, 1973. The slogan reads: “the army makes Larzac a desert; peasants are life”.

Drive 25 kilometres northwards from the sea of vineyards that cover the Languedoc plain, up a road that traces serpentine bends across the south face of the Massif Central, and you find yourself in a different world. Les Causses are vast, dry, grassy plateaux some 800 metres in elevation, peppered with curious rock formations, and separated from each other by vertiginous ravines. The southernmost of these is Le Larzac, known for the Lacaune sheep that provide the milk for Roquefort cheese.

In 1970, the government announced that it wanted to extend a military camp that was situated on the Larzac, and that this would involve expropriating some farmers. Unsurprisingly there was some resistance to this proposal from the farmers under threat and their neighbours. What was surprising was how this small local campaign ballooned into a movement of lasting national importance.

In January 1971, local farmers formed an action committee. In May, a left wing pacifist group organized a march of several hundred people against the camp, but only one of the local farmers attended. The peasants acted separately, dumping stones and manure in front of the local mayors’ offices in September. In November, another demonstration organized by the local branch of the FNSEA attracted some 6,000 people, partly thanks to support from the Catholic church.

In March 1972, Lanzo del Vasto, the saintly leader of the nearby Communauté de l’Arche, and a seasoned advocate of non-violence, went on a hunger strike in support of the peasants; he was joined for a day by the bishops of Rodez and Montpellier. This prompted 103 out of 107 farmers threatened by the camp to make a pledge not to leave their land.

In October the farmers organized a media stunt that became a classic of its kind — they released a flock of sheep beneath the Eiffel tower. This was followed up by a convoy of 26 tractors which set out to travel the 650 kilometres from the Larzac to Paris — not quite the Jarrow march, but quite a feat. When they reached Orleans, 130 kilometres from the capital, they found their passage blocked by the government. The FNSEA refused to support them, but the radical union Paysans Travailleurs, headed by Bernard Lambert, came to the rescue: the Larzac peasants rode into the capital on borrowed

tractors. Meanwhile, back on the plateau, locals laid the foundation stone of the Bergerie de la Blaquièrre, a brand new stone barn they were to build within the perimeter of the proposed camp.

After that the Larzac campaign became a focal point for a rainbow alliance of radical groups, an incarnation of what everybody had glimpsed and striven for in May 68. Left wingers and unions rallied round the peasants; Christians supported the pacifist ethos; students fighting a law which abolished exemptions for military service were happy to contest the army; long term strikers at the Lip watch factory sent the Larzac peasants a clock in the form of a sheep; third world activists organized a “harvest for the Sahel” on the plateau; the anti-nuclear movement built another bergerie at Plogoff in Brittany to which the Larzac peasants donated 20 sheep. Support came from native American Indians, from Japanese peasants, from US farmers and from Pacific islanders campaigning for independence. Jean-Paul Sartre called it “surely the most beautiful fight of the 20th century”.

Soon the demonstrations on the Larzac were massive, considering the place is about as isolated as Snowdonia. In 1973, a gathering organized by the Paysans Travailleurs, together with the Larzac farmers attracted 80,000 people. In a speech given on this occasion Bernard Lambert alluded to the support that peasants had given to the government when it brutally suppressed the 1871 Paris Commune:

“No longer will peasants support Versailles, no longer will they oppose those who rise to change society . . . A new era is born where peasants join workers and students in the struggle against capitalism.”

The government was paralysed, not only by the unprecedented level of non-violent support for the Larzac farmers, but also by the legal tactic of extreme subdivision of ownership. Over three thousand supporters of the campaign bought “a square metre of Larzac with an unobstructed view of the military camp”. The army’s lawyers bravely instigated proceedings, but just before they managed to serve the compulsory purchase order on these tiny plots, the owners would announce that they had been sold to someone else.

Governments rarely have the grace to back down when up against an unstoppable popular movement. They hate to lose face, and tend to hang on until they get thrown out of office. That is what happened in the case of Larzac. In 1981 the socialist François Mitterrand was elected as President, and he soon cancelled the plans to extend the army camp.

The Neo-Rurals

One other factor helps to account for the widespread support for Larzac and the numbers attending the demonstrations: the rural spillover from May 68. As the cold hand of the bourgeois state reasserted control over the capital, and disillusionment set in, many of the Paris *soixante-huitards* (sixty-eighters), as they were called, came to the conclusion that a move to the countryside offered the best opportunity for independence, experimentation and self-sufficiency. And it was cheap. Remote areas in the Pyrenees, the Massif Central and the backwaters of Languedoc, which had experienced a “rural exodus”, tempted newcomers with abandoned farms, cottages and even complete villages that were going for a pittance.

Sociologists called these new arrivals *néo-ruraux* (new rurals), though they preferred to call themselves *marginaux*. They were by no means all French — many were from Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, or other countries where cheap land and abandoned buildings could not be found so readily; but most had been influenced by the events of 1968. They were often embarrassingly short of practical skills — the builder in charge of constructing the Bergerie at La Blaquièrre complained that the hippies assigned to help him couldn’t even handle a wheelbarrow of cement. But those that got stuck into agriculture learned the hard way and they were full of ideas — about organic farming, ecology, healthy food and how to resist the steamroller of capitalism.

It was the genius of Bernard Lambert, a sharecropper’s son who left school at 14, to realise early on that these naive incomers had something to offer the peasant movement, just as they also had a lot to learn from the peasants. It was he, as much as anyone, who engineered an alliance between the two, initially through the mobilisation on the Larzac. In a speech given on the plateau in 1974 he asked:

“The uncontrolled technical progress which forces us to accept no matter what to ensure our profit and welfare . . . So how do we react? Huh? What do we do? . . . Continue to believe that our skin is the fairest, our civilization the finest, and our religion the only true one . . . and then die! Die! From being too rich, too fat and too stupid!”

This is not the rhetoric of a run of the mill union tactician, but the voice of a man who was in the rural vanguard of May 68, and grasped what it was about. Lambert was not swayed by productivist arguments. In 1980, in the face of opposition from some colleagues, he was at the front of a campaign to prevent the use of hormones in beef production.



The first of 29 houses demolished by the police at ZAD in April 2018.

In 1981 he founded the organization that in 1987 became the Confédération Paysanne, which is today the mouthpiece for France’s radical agro-ecological peasantry. But in 1984 he died in a car crash. An obituarist in *Le Monde* wrote:

“He occupied a unique place in a movement without leaders. He will be missed by the French agricultural industry which, in its current tormented state, is more in need of imagination than agitation.”

The word “imagination” here is a barely disguised reference to one of the slogans of 1968: “L’imagination prend pouvoir” (Imagination Rules OK). There was no shortage of imagination to follow in Lambert’s wake, and that came in good part from *néo-ruraux*.

One such was René Riesel, who in May 68, when he was barely 18, had been elected president of the Occupation Committee of the Sorbonne. In June, he joined the Situationist International, but then moved out to the country and became a sheep farmer on the remote Causse de Méjean, to the north of the Larzac. From 1995 to 1999 he was a national secretary of the Confédération, during which time he spearheaded their campaign against genetically modified crops.

Another neo-rural was José Bové, spokesman for the Confédération between 1999 and 2004, who became a sheep farmer after getting involved in the Larzac campaign. Bové made his name after being imprisoned for destroying a Macdonald’s restaurant in the town of Millau, as part of a campaign targeting global capitalism, hormone beef and junk food.

Such campaigns were successful because they focussed on the concerns of consumers, rather than simply on the plight of a small sector of the workforce — something that the *vignerons* of Languedoc failed to grasp.

Activists who fled to the countryside after 1968 were often accused of escapism, and in the short term this was perhaps true. But once they found their footing they played a key role in rallying a peasantry that was foundering, by showing the public that how we produce our food, and how we manage the land are matters of importance.

Agitculture

"It felt like we were robbing a bank. Organised, dressed in black, head lamps, maps, scouts etc. Except all we were doing was evacuating the bee hives from the destroyed homes and gardens, getting them off site. We had to carry them full of bees across the hedgerows behind police lines."

This testimony from Paul, a beekeeper at ZAD, sums up the lunacy of a police operation which set out to destroy a highly sustainable rural community with a wide range of enterprises and public services — far more than you would find in the average village these days: two bakeries (one pictured below) a cheese dairy, a brewery, herb drying facilities, a library, a carpentry shop, a daily market where people pay whatever they think they can afford.



Another group, calling themselves Abracadaboïs, occupy themselves with anything to do with wood, including management of the numerous hedges that characterise the bocage landscape.

The photo below shows them working in their spacious timber-framed workshop knocking up an entire barn frame in a couple of days with hand tools. Who needs circular saws? The frame was moved in one piece by about 150 people to the site of a previously demolished building to show the forces of order that whatever they destroy can rise again. The police vandals chain-sawed it to bits in a matter of minutes, but no matter — ZAD will return.



ZAD's farm, run by a group calling themselves Sème Ta Zad (Sow Your ZAD) in 2017 cultivated about 15 hectares of arable, primarily down to buckwheat, sunflowers, potatoes, onions and beans. There were also two orchards, ten dairy cows and a flock of sheep and a mechanics' workshop for maintaining their fleet of aging tractors, here seen harvesting potatoes.



French activists learnt a thing or two from UK road protests and climate camps; but it is time British activists, who until now have hardly excelled at farming, took the ZAD as a model. It is tilling soil and tending woodland that gives one the right to occupy rural land. That is why the folk at Larzac were allowed to stay, and if the Zadists are allocated land, it will be for the same reason.

Until British activists learn how to farm, they will never secure the rural land they occupy. And that doesn't mean a couple of raised beds and a barren goat, but coming in with a tractor and ploughing and sowing abandoned fields, thereby winning the right to harvest the crop.

The people best equipped to do this in the UK are the Land Workers' Alliance, our equivalent of the Confédération Paysanne. And where better to start than a County Farm that is being sold off?

The Second Battle of Nantes

In 1993, La Confédération Paysanne became one of the founders of Via Campesina, the global alliance of peasant organisations. In today's globalised economy, where rules are made by the World Trade Organisation, and prices manipulated by transnational corporations, peasants have to co-operate at an international level to fend off the onslaught upon their way of life from the forces of neoliberalism. Food sovereignty, agro-ecological farming and the protection of small-scale farms are dominant themes. The battle against *cumulars* now focusses on resistance to 1,000 cow factory farms, to motorway schemes, to fracking, to nuclear facilities — all the landgrabbing manifestations of insatiable capitalism.

The most *soixant-huitesque* action in recent years has been the ZAD occupation of land scheduled for an overflow airport for Paris which, funnily enough, was first proposed in 1968, and is situated near Nantes, where the events of May 68 first kicked off. The land has been occupied since 2009 when a climate camp was held there and now hosts a thriving squatter village there, or at least did until recently (see box on previous page, and also *The Land* 21 p 7).

The campaign against the airport in many ways echoes that against the extension to the army camp on the Larzac some 40 years previously, and for a time it followed the same pattern. Just as the camp at Larzac was abandoned when François Mitterrand became president, so one of the first things Macron did when he came to power was to order a review of the airport, following which he announced in January 2018 that the airport would not be built.

Victory! Well no, because in the same breath Macron decreed that the site would be cleared of the people occupying it. An ad hoc alliance of groups ranging from The Confédération Paysanne to Greenpeace had proposed that 270 hectares out of the total 1650 should be managed by the ZAD community. As a precedent they cited what had happened at Larzac in 1981, when the land sequestered by the state was placed under the management of a collective, and remains so to this day.

Macron was not interested. Was he too stupid to grasp that the medium is the message, that the alternatives which flower out of a resistance movement signal the future? Probably not: it is more likely that this neoliberal, Trump-sucking creep simply didn't like the alternative society that was being created. On 9 April, he authorized 2,500 riot police to evict the Zadistes and destroy their buildings using armoured cars, tear gas and



Fifty years on from 1968, the authorities in Nantes resort to water cannon at a 10,000 strong demonstration against the evictions at ZAD.

the vicious Flashball antipersonnel explosives developed by the French military for crowd control. It was state vandalism gone mad. For eight days the police indulged in an orgy of destruction, demolishing 29 buildings and causing 270 injuries. An immediate result of their action was that the number of protesters on site, according to the chief of police operations, swelled from 250 to 700.

Then on 13 April, Nicole Klein, the prefect of the Loire-Atlantique said that she had been authorised “from above” to “stretch out her hand” to the occupiers of ZAD. She invited applications from individuals for agricultural proposals linked to plots of land, to be handed in by 23 April.

After prevarication the Zadistes decide to accept the invitation, albeit emphasising that they wanted to manage the site collectively and that their ambitions reached beyond agriculture. Applications for 40 different projects, ranging from sunflower oil production and a shepherding school to a mechanics' garage and sports group, were handed in with plots of lands earmarked, but with no single name attached to a single plot.

On their receipt the prefect announced that there would be no further evictions until May 14 — and that is where things stand as we go to press. All we can predict with confidence is that, after 50 years, *la lutte continue*: the struggle goes on. May '68, like ZAD, is everywhere.

Most of the material for this article (apart from the section on ZAD) is drawn from *Des “Mai 68” dans les Campagnes Françaises*, by Jean-Philippe Martin, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2017.

For a first hand day-by-day account in English of the evictions at ZAD, including many good photos, see John Jordan, *The Revenge of the Commons*, <https://zadforever.blog/2018/04/24/the-revenge-against-the-commons/>