

Report on the talk ‘Collective Farming and Land-Struggles’ at the Food Autonomy Festival in Bajesdorp, Amsterdam on the 6th of May 2017

The talk ‘Collective Farming and Land-Struggles’ was comprised of five presentations on five different projects throughout Europe. Members from each of the five projects traveled to Amsterdam for the Food Autonomy Festival to provide information on their respective struggles and encourage the building of a network.

The first project ‘Grow Heathrow’ presented by Richard and Simon concerns the land occupation near Heathrow airport in London in the UK. In order to stop the expansion of the airport, a group of activists occupied the land roughly seven years ago. The site was abandoned, being used as an illegal dump and had not been in use for 30 years.

After the climate camp in 2007 near Heathrow airport, which is a big source of Greenhouse gas emissions, the activists decided to positively use the space and moved into the village to set up a permanent living community as opposed to a temporary camp. In order to strengthen their campaign and establish a community-based project, they also involved the locals. They built a market garden, started making use of abandoned greenhouses and built low-impact structures like tree houses, cabins, a bike workshop and a small music venue, but left the site as wild as possible. 25 activists live on the land.

With their land occupation, the Grow Heathrow activists aim to stop the destruction of two villages, lower the noise impact and draw attention to the fact that aviation is the fastest growing greenhouse gas emission source, but is nonetheless exempt from the Paris climate summit. Additionally, 70% of all flights are taken by only 15% of the population in the UK, mostly for leisure. Aviation has a big impact on climate change and is mostly available for people from the Global North, thus being a form of 21st century colonialism. Grow Heathrow highlights the fact that aviation is a crossroads of different issues: it is the crisis of communities, housing, transport and energy.

Day to day life at Grow Heathrow is shaped by the community living there. Two days of the week are set aside as working days. Different working groups concern themselves with different issues arising and hold a meeting in the morning. Once per week there is a big meeting and their decision-making is based on consensus. Grow Heathrow is an alternative way of living that aims to move away from centralisation and to grow their own food, learn how to use waste and be as autonomous as possible. Currently, they are fighting a court case and waiting for the verdict.

The second project ‘Transfarmers’ presented by Sophie is a group of people who created a neighbourhood garden in Den Bosch in the south of the Netherlands. Behind their house, which has been squatted for 12 years, they found a big spot of land (owned by a development company) that has been unused for a long time. The activists tried speaking to the owners for three years and eventually got help from an organisation, which provides assistance to bottom-up initiatives. They decided to squat the land and have started negotiations with the owner in order to get a contract for 10 years to be able to develop the garden further. The one hectare of land is squatted since five years and used by the collective consisting of 100 people to grow food, organise workshops and create a sustainable urban environment.

The next project ‘Toekomstburen’ was presented by Bas, who studies organic farming at ‘Fruittuin West’ in Amsterdam, and is part of the first class graduating. Toekomstburen is an association of farmers or people who want to become farmers so as to create a more democratic agricultural system and achieve progress in harmony with nature and society. The studies assist in moving towards urban agriculture and develop entrepreneurial behaviour in order to find land. There are many different ways of obtaining land, but often you are dependent on companies and local authorities.

Every city publishes zoning plans available to the public, which provide information on plans for land use and development projects. With the help of these zoning plans, Bas found a four hectare piece of land on which the new owners plan to build their house. He wants to cooperate with them to create an urban farming project and recently started negotiations. Thus, struggle for land can be facilitated by cooperating with authorities, owners or companies.

The fourth project 'Radical Allotment Gardens' in Poland was presented by Basha and Oscar. A group of activists occupied a piece of land two years ago, but currently they are having troubles with the legal authorities and do not know how much longer they will be able to continue. ROD was started by two people, who were inspired by Grow Heathrow and ZAD during a meeting concerning land grabbing and the industrial food system. These issues were not part of the radical left movement in Poland before. Since this issue was new, they had to create awareness, wherefore they tried to associate themselves with other urban struggles, such as tenants associations. The aim was to develop DIY strategies in order to be independent, while at the same time creating networks to achieve food sovereignty. Currently, there are 12 social gardens in Warsaw, but they are all managed by NGOs and therefore they considered it important to introduce an alternative approach to gardening. They built constructions from scrap to create and improve living spaces on their land. To counter struggles with the local community they organised info-meetings for the neighbours, but still have to face great repression from the state, which recently led to the arrest of three activists.

The last project 'La Terre de Louves' presented by Max is a collective farm in the southwest of France. The project is only one year old and thus still relatively new. The land was bought with inherited money and in order to share the privilege, they created a farming community based on collective ownership. Currently, five people live on 19 hectares of land, but aim to create an anarchist village with about 20 to 40 people. They got inspired by ZAD and other radical communities and want to create a space for radical experimentation along the lines of anarchist and feminist ideologies and encourage people to build and construct things on the land, such as wind turbines, cabins, tree houses, hobbit houses... The group aims to grow their own food based on permaculture, save seeds, create a food forest and share support with other radical projects. Therefore, they plan anarchist gatherings and workshops, which provide the opportunity to share information and support each other. The activists ascribe great importance to the awareness of power structures and hierarchies when dealing with conflicts within the group in order to create a harmonious and aware living group. In relation to land struggles, the activists aim to provide their surplus to different radical projects.

After the presentation of the five projects, a discussion on the issues of temporality and informal hierarchies started. Temporality is an important issue in farming. Improving soil and growing food are long-term projects, wherefore security is needed. Therefore, according to some, squatting can be too insecure and involving local authorities might be more conducive to the creation of long-term projects. On the other hand, involving authorities also means that you undermine radical ideologies. Despite the instability of land occupations, you still gain experience and contacts, which prepare you for the following land occupation. Depending whether your aim is to change the system or whether it is reformism/Green capitalism, different strategies apply. An objection to reformist strategies is that they can be a problem for other radical projects. Support is essential, therefore communication between different radical groups is very important to create a network of places providing food and solidarity.

Informal hierarchies is another critical issue in collective farming. Since people from an urban context often don't realise how much work it takes to grow food and build houses, informal hierarchies based on experience can arise. At Grow Heathrow, in order to avoid hierarchies, they developed a system of work groups to divide responsibilities and offer the opportunity to develop skills in a specific area. It is important to create transparent structures through communication in

order to meet everyone's needs. Yet, the structures are flexible and based on skill-sharing and rotation. Max from La Terre des Louves added that networks and communication are important not only within your community, but also between communities and radical projects throughout the whole world in order to maintain links, communicate and provide support. Solidarity is essential for collective farming and land struggles.