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## Georges Fontenis, 1920–2010

With the death of Georges Fontenis, we have lost one of the leading figures in the postwar revolutionary movement in France. He played an important role in the reconstruction and reform of the French anarchist movement after the Second World War, and in supporting those fighting for Algerian independence from French colonialism in the 1950s and 60s, as well as Spanish libertarians fighting the Francoist dictatorship; a prominent activist in May 68, he would go on—alongside others such as Daniel Guérin—to help (re)create a libertarian communist movement in the 1970s; an active trade unionist all his life in the '*Ecole Emancipée*' tendency (a long-standing schoolteachers' organisation linked to anarcho-syndicalism and the far left), he was also in later life one of the pillars of the '*Libre Pensée*' (Free Thought) movement; having joined the Union of Libertarian Communist Workers (UTCL) in 1980, he would subsequently become a member of *Alternative Libertaire*, created by the UTCL and other left libertarian groups in 1991, and would remain a member—still a committed revolutionary—until his death at the age of 90.

Georges Fontenis was born on 27 April 1920 in a working-class family and spent his childhood in the so-called 'red belt' of the Paris region. As a youth, he would read his parents' syndicalist and socialist newspapers, as well as anarchist, trotskyist and pacifist ones such as *Le Libertaire*, *La Vérité* and *La Patrie Humaine*. At the time of the Popular Front, he was disillusioned by the Communist Party's new-found patriotism—it was at this time, thanks to Stalin's foreign policy, that it adopted the official title of "French Communist Party" (as opposed to "Communist Party, French Section of the Communist International")—and by what he saw as its betrayal of the Spanish revolution. He was equally critical of the position adopted by the absolute pacifists with regard to the Spanish war (there being many overlaps between the anarchist and pacifist movements in France at that time) and of the 'ministerialism' of the CNT leadership. (Many years later, he would produce a booklet on the Friends of Durruti.) It was around this time that Fontenis thus joined the *Union Anarchiste*, and at the age of 17 read the complete works of Bakunin (six volumes) as well as most of Kropotkin's writings.

During the Occupation, Fontenis and his anarchist friends continued to meet secretly, and he was a member of the clandestine CGT (General Labour Confederation). At the Liberation, along with the trotskyist Marcel Penneret and others, he helped relaunch the *Ecole Emancipée*. Because of this commitment to the free syndicalist movement (unions had been banned), the Ministry for Education appointed Fontenis to the commission established to conduct the purge ('*épuration*') of teachers who had collaborated with the nazi occupying forces or with Vichy (the reactionary, authoritarian puppet regime led by Marshal Pétain which had ruled the southern half of France from 1940 to 1944).

Years of difficult and dangerous efforts to rebuild the anarchist movement culminated in the creation of an Anarchist Federation (FA) towards the end of 1944, and Fontenis became the youngest member of the Federation's provisional administrative committee. He was given the particular job of relaunching the *Jeunesses Anarchistes* (Anarchist Youth), of which he was secretary for a while. At the same time, he became a member of the FA's East Paris group (ie. the 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements*). He was now working as a primary school teacher in the same part of Paris.

The early congresses of this new FA tended to reproduce the same ideological conflicts which had divided the movement in the 1920s and 1930s, namely the conflict between "synthesists" and "platformists". Fontenis, like most activists of his generation, knew nothing of the *Plate-forme*,

but he saw social and political struggle very much in terms of class conflict and was in favour of greater ideological and organisational cohesiveness within the movement. It was under the influence of revolutionary anarchists such as Louis Mercier-Vega that the younger generations of FA militants began to be interested in the *Plate-forme* and in the writings of Camillo Berneri.

At the 1946 congress of the FA, in Dijon, Fontenis spoke on behalf of the JA, criticising “the vain, navel-gazing windbags whose talk is entirely negative and destructive” (*Changer le monde*, p.58). He was seen as somebody new, dynamic, who belonged to none of the existing factions; as a result, his views gained broad support in a divided organisation, and he was elected general secretary of the FA.

Despite these internal conflicts, the anarchist movement did experience some growth during this period. Fontenis was responsible for a series of articles in the weekly *Le Libertaire* on ‘The Problem of Education and Schools’, and became a regular speaker (often under the name of Fontaine) at public meetings organised by the FA. When the CGT split in 1947 under the influence of the nascent Cold War, the FA called on workers to distance themselves equally from the CGT, now dominated by the stalinists, and the newly-created reformist, anti-communist CGT-FO (*Force Ouvrière*). Instead, the FA developed the notion of “Third Force”: “Neither Thorez [then leader of the PCF], nor De Gaulle, nor Stalin, nor Truman” (*Le Libertaire*, 23 October 1947). Having been made editor of *Le Libertaire* and taken a year’s unpaid leave from his school, Fontenis attended public meetings organised during 1947-48 by the PCF, the Socialist Party, the Gaullists and the RDR (the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire*, a short-lived revolutionary democratic socialist movement supported notably by Jean-Paul Sartre and a number of well-known former trotskysists) in order to argue publicly with their speakers and present the FA’s position.

Towards the end of the 1940s, the different tendencies within the FA were becoming more marked, and so along with a number of other prominent activists (Roger Caron, Serge Ninn, Louis Estève, Maurice Lavorel *et al*), Fontenis created a kind of secret ginger group, named *Organisation Pensée Bataille* after the book written by Berneri in 1937. The OPB’s existence would be revealed by the ‘Kronstadt Group Memorandum’ in 1954 and would be strongly criticised by some. Fontenis himself, in later years, would regret the “romantic conspiratorialism” of this episode. However, the OPB was to a large extent a symptom of the reaction of the younger militants against the “old beards” in the FA. Before the OPB was set up, the ‘traditionalists’ in the Federation were already organised as a faction and constituted, according to Maurice Joyeux, an “epistolary lobby”: “It wasn’t a structured group with the aim of expelling from the Anarchist Federation those who had different opinions, but a national correspondence network which achieved effectively the same results, that is to say, it determined the outcome of congress with regard to proposals which had been formulated beforehand, outside of congress.” (Maurice Joyeux, ‘L’Affaire Fontenis’ in *La Rue* n°28, 1980).

In 1948, Fontenis was asked by a group of Spanish anarchists for his help in the organisation of an attempt on Franco’s life: an aeroplane was needed and it had to be bought by a French national. Not only was the attempted assassination unsuccessful, however, but in February 1951, following a hold-up in a post-office in Lyon, Fontenis was arrested and accused by the police of being an accomplice because of alleged (but fictitious) links between the robbers responsible and Spanish exile circles in France. He was soon released.

At the FA’s 1951 congress (in Lille), Fontenis did not stand for election to the national committee, and André Moine became general secretary. Fontenis nevertheless continued his work in the OPB and contributed to *Le Libertaire*. At that congress, the two main tendencies within the FA clashed on three issues: the question of voting at congress (one member one vote); the Federation’s

position on trade unions and the call for a “*grève gestionnaire*” (strike with occupation and workers’ control); and the policy of the “Third front”—with the slogans “Against Stalin, but not for Truman. Against Truman, but not for Stalin”—and “Third proletarian front”.

The next year’s congress, at Bordeaux (1952), adopted a “libertarian communist” stance, but it was not until 1953 that the FA officially renamed itself the *Fédération communiste libertaire* (FCL, Libertarian Communist Federation) following a referendum among the membership. The renamed organisation continued with the same activities, albeit with greater emphasis on anti-colonial work, more encouragement of members to become more actively involved in trade union work, and a more open attitude towards the contribution made by marxist analyses. It was a question of making class struggle more central to the anarchist movement’s politics, an objective which Fontenis—having once more been made general secretary—actively supported. In 1953, with four other OPB members (Serge Ninn, René Lustre, Roger Caron and André Moine), he contributed to the revision of a series of theoretical articles on ‘Central Problems’ which had appeared in *Le Libertaire*, and these were published as a booklet entitled *Manifeste du communisme libertaire (A Libertarian Communist Manifesto)*. This manifesto is still read and influential in Latin America today.

The central role played by Fontenis in these developments led many traditionalists to focus their attacks on him personally and he would be demonised for years after, with some even denouncing what they called “Fontenism” or “Fontenismism”. In 1953 a new breakaway Anarchist Federation was launched which rejected ‘platformism’ in favour of the ‘synthesis’ view of the movement, led notably by Maurice Joyeux, Maurice Laisant and Aristide Lapeyre. Its organ was *Le Monde Libertaire*.

The FCL became increasingly involved in anticolonial campaigns in the mid 1950s, arguing that French revolutionaries should adopt a policy of “critical support” towards the Algerian nationalist movement. Unlike many anarchists and others on the left, the FCL supported the call for independence right from the start of the insurrection, and this stance attracted the support of a number of politically committed intellectuals, such as Daniel Guérin. It also meant the paper got a warm reception from Algerians in the Goutte d’Or quarter of Paris or in towns such as Roubaix with high numbers of immigrant workers. Nor was the FCL’s support purely verbal: it included the creation of networks of so-called ‘*porteurs de valise*’ (literally: suitcase carriers), couriers who transported money, documents and even arms for those fighting for Algerian independence. The FCL and its paper suffered the consequences of their actions and were attacked repeatedly by the state through censorship, prosecutions and fines, and the seizure of certain issues of “*Le Lib*”, as the paper was known. In the summer of 1955, three of the paper’s editors, including Fontenis, were arrested and charged with offences against national security.

It was at this time that, having launched a debate about the traditional electoral abstentionism of the anarchist movement, the FCL’s national committee decided to present a list of “antiparliamentary” candidates in the general election of January 1956. The sole list which the Federation put up—in the 13<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris—won only 2,500 votes, and Fontenis would in later years come to regard this decision as having been “a rather ridiculous mistake”, partly because it was so divisive and alienated some of the FCL’s most active groups, and in part because some militants “allowed themselves to be taken in as to the potential ramifications of the campaign” (*Changer le monde*, p.129).

With continued repression of all kinds—arrests, prosecutions and the newspaper being seized—the FCL’s national committee came to the conclusion in July 1956 that it was no longer possible to produce *Le Libertaire* (mostly for financial reasons); agitation against the war in Algeria

was to be pursued, however. In the issue of *Le Libertaire* which announced this decision (12 July), there also appeared a 'Call for a United Front of Revolutionaries' signed by Fontenis and other FCL militants, as well as by a number of trotskyists belonging to various tendencies. Unfortunately, this appeal produced little response—from revolutionaries at least: the following day, Fontenis and the other FCL activists were arrested and interrogated by the DST (the '*Direction de la surveillance du territoire*', an intelligence body under the Ministry of the Interior responsible amongst other things for counter-espionage). After their release, but still under surveillance, Fontenis and three other comrades (Paul Phillippe, Pirre Morain and Gilbert Simon), believing the country was on the verge of a revolutionary situation, decided to go underground.

Fontenis, living with false papers in an unheated bedsit in Paris 18<sup>th</sup>, survived through financial help from the Federation, and was given the job of re-establishing links with groups in the provinces. He worked to create networks of revolutionaries across the country and made contact with militants in a number of other organisations, notably the *Nouvelle Gauche* (the 'New Left', a small, antistalinist revolutionary group that included ex-trotskyists such as Jacques Danos and Yvan Craipeau and the libertarian marxist Daniel Guérin). He also developed close links with the *Mouvement libertaire nord-africain* (MLNA), the *Mouvement national algérien* (MNA) and the Algerian FLN (*Front de libération nationale*). (Le Fil du Temps have produced a documentary DVD about this: *Une résistance oubliée (1954-1957), des libertaires dans la guerre d'Algérie*—[http://boutique.alternativelibertaire.org/produit.php?ref=DVD\\_Algerie&id\\_rubrique=5](http://boutique.alternativelibertaire.org/produit.php?ref=DVD_Algerie&id_rubrique=5) )

During its period underground, the FCL managed to produce two issues of a paper entitled *La Volonté du peuple* ('The People's Will'), which were distributed at factory gates and at busy junctions in the outskirts of Paris. Several issues of a magazine, *Les Cahiers de la critique sociale*, also appeared, and carried studies of events in Hungary, as well as discussions of historical materialism and other theoretical questions.

Fontenis was finally caught by the DST in July 1957 and sentenced to nearly two years in prison and fined over a million francs. Fortunately, he benefited from the French tradition of 'collective amnesty' following a presidential election, when General de Gaulle took power the following year. The fines, however, still had to be paid, and this Fontenis managed to do progressively with some difficulty over a number of years and with a great deal of help from comrades. It was difficult for him to get another job as a teacher in the state sector after this, but he finally did so in 1958, although he was barred from working in the Paris region because of his record.

With the FCL having now collapsed, Fontenis took part in a group created by other former FCL activists called *Action communiste* which also had good links with some members of the internal opposition in the Communist Party (especially trotskyists) and with some members of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. *Action communiste* only lasted a few months though, and Fontenis joined *Voie communiste* (literally: 'Communist Path'), an ecumenical, extreme-left grouping founded around opposition to the Algerian war. Fontenis soon figured on the editorial board of the group's journal, *La Voie communiste*, alongside Denis Berger and Félix Guattari, amongst others. At this time he was using the pseudonym G. Grandfond.

At the same time, Fontenis was working discreetly with the antifrancoist *Popular Resistance Movement*, and found himself working alongside old FCL comrades in anticolonial struggles, in trade union struggles (particularly in the CGT and the *Ecole émancipée* group) and in the antifascist '*Comités de défense de la République*' (Committees for the Defence of the Republic) campaign of protest against the attempted military coup in Algiers in 1961 and against the return of General de Gaulle.

But like many former FCL militants, he felt somewhat lost in the period 1957-68, and he devoted himself to teaching. He studied at the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Saint-Cloud in 1959, becoming a school inspector 1962-67, and then a lecturer in educational psychology at the *Ecole Normale* for primary school teachers in Tours from 1967. He subsequently also qualified as a headteacher.

Fontenis played a role in the libertarian movement once more with the events of 1968. Along with railworkers belonging to the revolutionary minority within FO (the antistalinist *Force Ouvrière* union confederation), university and high-school students, some members of the minority opposition in the PCF and maoists from different tendencies, Fontenis helped create in Tours (where he had settled) a *Comité d'action révolutionnaire* (CAR, Revolutionary Action Committee), of which he became one of the leading lights. This CAR included high-school students belonging to the *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* (JCR, Revolutionary Communist Youth, the communist student group which had been expelled from the PCF and would go on to create today's LCR), militants of the PSU (Parti Socialiste Unifié), young Communists, and maoists belonging to the *Parti communiste marxiste-léniniste de France* (PCMLF). Many activities undertaken by the CAR were organised jointly with the PSU and the maoist youth organisation, the *Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes* (UJCML). The Tours CAR had groups in the university and a number of workplaces, and on 31 May 1968 adopted a "Platform for a revolutionary organisation".

As for the anarchist movement as such at the time, Fontenis was highly critical and would comment years later on "the complete impotence of the libertarian movement" at the end of 1967 and the "almost complete absence of the organised anarchist movement during the events" of 1968 (*Changer le monde*, pp.156-6).

It was for this reason that, whilst being involved with the CAR in Tours, he also got back in touch with his old comrade Pierre Morain and with him launched an 'Appeal to former members of the FCL and to members of the UGAC [*Union des groupes anarchistes-communistes*]' in an attempt to relaunch the libertarian communist movement in the country, but little came of it. Fontenis and other ex-FCL people then created a libertarian communist group called *Action Tours* which affiliated to the UGAC. Fontenis was also involved with the *Comité d'initiative pour un mouvement révolutionnaire* (CIMR), founded in June 1968 by the UGAC, the JCR and various other revolutionary groups. Within the UGAC, he argued against the so-called '*spontanéistes*' and with Guy Bourgeois and others in favour of a structured, specific organisation, capable of playing the role of an *avant-garde*. After a number of meetings and debates, Fontenis organised with Daniel Guérin a national meeting in Paris in May 1969 which in effect became the constitutive congress of a *Mouvement communiste libertaire* (MCL). Fontenis produced a statement of the basic theoretical positions on which the group was to be founded; Guérin became responsible for the group's paper, *Guerre de classes* (*Class War*).

The majority of the MCL, Fontenis and Guérin included, favoured the idea of fusion with another group, the *Organisation révolutionnaire anarchiste* (ORA), but it was not to be. In July 1971, a few groups belonging to the ORA merged with the MCL to create the *Organisation communiste libertaire*. *Guerre de classes* became the organ of this OCL. The OCL's membership covered much more of the country than the MCL's had done, and it also had a greater proportion of working-class members. On a theoretical level, the OCL was inspired by the antiauthoritarian currents of the labour movement at the time of the First International, anarcho-syndicalism, councilism and the analyses of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. With the growth of a widespread social apathy in the years

following 1974, however, the OCL went into decline, with some groups adopting 'spontaneist' or 'ultraleftist' positions, and the organisation was dissolved in 1976.

In 1954, Fontenis had written an article for the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* on revolutionary activism within the trade unions, and in 1977 he was asked by the *Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires* (UTCL, Union of Libertarian Communist Workers) for permission to reproduce this article in their journal, *Tout le pouvoir aux travailleurs* (*All Power to the Workers*). The UTCL had been created as a revolutionary syndicalist tendency within the *Organisation révolutionnaire anarchiste* following the big banking, railway, post and telecoms strikes of 1974. Having become critical of the ORA's ultraleftist dismissal of work in the labour movement, the UTCL was expelled in 1976 and set itself up as an independent organisation in 1978. The UTCL's strategy was to build a new libertarian communist organisation within a broader anticapitalist movement focussed on *autogestion* (workers' control). Fontenis, who was very sympathetic towards these aims, attended its constitutive congress, and in 1980 he became a member.

The following years saw meetings between the UTCL and several other organisations belonging to the libertarian communist or anarcho-communist traditions, and this led to the publication in 1989 of a "Call for a Libertarian Alternative". The upshot was the launch in 1991 of *Alternative libertaire* (AL), which Fontenis joined, the UTCL having dissolved itself.

During the 1980s and 90s, Fontenis wrote a great deal. His 1953 *Manifeste du Communisme Libertaire* was republished in 1985, but he also wrote two booklets: one a study of the then relatively unknown Friends of Durruti: *Le Message révolutionnaire des Amis de Durruti* (1983); and the other an analysis from a revolutionary point of view of the Popular Front era: *Il y a 50 ans, le Front populaire* (1986). Most important, though, was his semi-autobiographical study of the history of the post-war French anarchist and libertarian communist movements, *L'autre communisme* (*The Other Communism*), which appeared in 1990. This has since been republished (twice, in 2000 and 2008) with the title *Changer le monde. Histoire du mouvement communiste libertaire (1945-1997)* (*Change the World. A History of the Libertarian Communist Movement, 1945-1997*).

This was not only of interest to veteran militants in their 70s wanting to go over old times or old disputes. Whilst setting the record straight on certain episodes and responding—after many years' silence—to certain personal attacks, it is not devoid of self-critique and it was and remains an important contribution to the history of the anarchist movement after 1945 and to a proper analysis of the lessons of that history. For many young libertarians who had taken part in social struggles for the first time between the end of the 1980s (notably the so-called 'co-ordinations' set up by the railworkers, students, teachers, post-office workers and nurses) and the early 1990s (antifascist campaigns, the unemployed and homeless movements, the massive strikes of winter 1995, etc), the first edition of Fontenis' book opened their eyes to a new conception of anarchism, it revealed a new history, or—to use Georges' own phrase—the existence of "another communism". At a time when politicians, journalists and academic pundits—faced with the collapse of Mitterrandist social-democracy and the continuing decline of the Communist Party and the trade union movement—could only speak of 'consensus' and the 'end of ideology', the appearance of Fontenis' book coincided with the reprise of struggles and the appearance of new social movements.

This reappearance of social conflicts also coincided with attempts to regroup the anarchists, as noted above. As early as 1918, the concept of 'traditional anarchism' or 'pure anarchism' had appeared in France, and this concept would serve to marginalise and in some cases to demonise other conceptions, notably those which sought greater ideological clarity and more organisational efficacy, as well as closer links with the wider labour movement. This is what made it possible for the

platformists of the 1920s and 30s (responsible for creating a first *Fédération communiste libertaire* in 1934-36) to be condemned by Voline and others for supposedly “bolshevizing” anarchism. Twenty odd years later, the same accusation—the “*marxisation*” of anarchism, in the words of Maurice Joyeux—would be made against the second FCL, the one whose history is explained from a rather different perspective in Fontenis’ book. This book was therefore important in that it demystified the FCL and OPB, questioning the dominant representations of these episodes in the movement’s history put forward by those who claimed the right to define the “true” anarchism. For even though Fontenis admitted that some mistakes had been made (notably “the illusions and excesses of the OPB”), he also insisted that “I still stand by the essential things.”

For several years after joining AL, Fontenis contributed to the monthly *Alternative libertaire*, then, as his health declined, he wrote less and less. He remained a member of AL until his death at his home in Reignac-sur-Indre on 9 August.

For more than fifty years, Georges Fontenis was involved in every major struggle, and as his old comrade Denis Berger put it in a review of *Changer le monde*: “He knew how to evolve, to change his ideas as necessary, but fundamentally he remained faithful to the choices he made as a youth. He was—and he stayed—a revolutionary.”