

Le Monde libertaire

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Georges Fontenis : Journey of an adventurist of the Libertarian movement ¹

(Part 2)

What can explain the rise of Georges Fontenis, who within an organization constituted of anarchist militants, has so easily cumulated the functions of General Secretary for five years, of responsible for the self-defense group, of responsible for the training courses for young activists, of responsible for the *Revue anarchiste*, of permanent editor and publisher of *Le Libertaire*, of responsible for the Education commission, of chairman of the Anarchist Youth and above all of chairman of the OPB!

The Memorandum of the Kronstadt group tries an explanation:

“Thus, using the passivity of the mass of activists and methodic infiltration, a fraction was able to control and rule the entire Federation. [...] Its monolithic thought and its disciplined cohesion enabled a strategy and tactics that easily triumphed

¹ Source : *Monde Libertaire* n°1605 (23-29 septembre 2010) - Georges Fontenis : parcours d'un ave... <http://www.monde-libertaire.fr/index.php?view=items&cid=5676:nd16...> 4 sur 4 21/09/2011 21:56

over the dispersed activists, who were confident in the federalism of the organization.”

According to the Memorandum, the success of Fontenis' attempt was especially due to the “lack of revolutionary vigilance from the activists and to the passive renunciation of many of them to use their right to criticize facts which could have seemed questionable to them”

Finally, in conclusion, it denounces: “[...] Some activists have organized a secret society within the Anarchist Federation with a leading bureau, division of labour, management, quasi-military discipline, statutes and goals, along with a unmentioned and unmentionable ultimate objectives. It is difficult indeed to prove conclusively that the ultimate goal: the Bolshevization, the taking of control of the Federation, is at the base of the OPB. Some will find it reassuring enough, however it happens that from an ideological and organizational point of view, we have no right to concern ourselves with intentions that might have originally been sincere, but that nonetheless were deviationist from the start. We cannot introduce into political analysis the sentimental notion of ‘good intentions’ and most of all we cannot do so as conscious activists when it comes to actions that are totally opposed to the very foundation of the anarchist doctrine. To believe or to pretend to believe that we will be able to create a libertarian and federalist organization while acting secretly and behind the backs of comrades, passing over the heads of the groups and of the assemblies, in contradiction with all the federalist principles, to take bureaucratically control of the organizational apparatus, to believe that by organizing the dictatorship, we fight for freedom, all this can have no other meaning than naivety or a total absence of anarchist political education.”

In his memoirs, *Sous les plis du drapeau noir. Souvenirs d'un anarchiste* (éditions du Monde libertaire, 1988) (Under the folds of the black flag. Memories of an anarchist), Maurice Joyeux proposes another theory focused on the personality of Fontenis:

“The General chair of the organization does not have for us the importance it has elsewhere, in leftist political parties. In order to give it a similar importance, we must transform the organization and make it expand. By making the organization grow, we make bigger the one or those who are in charge. The gap between anarchist federalism and the population is still too large for the organization to develop and for it to acquire a mass character. One solution only: to introduce next to an amiable libertarian spirit Marx's dialectical materialism which, at that time, was spreading around at cruising speed. Only the contribution of Marxism can allow for the accelerated development of the Anarchist Federation, only the transformation of the Anarchist Federation can give importance first to its General Chair, and, consequently, to its inspirator, who is, like Lenin, assumed to be paddling in genius. *That* is the Fontenis case as far as I am concerned, and if you put the methods aside, many others later will try to paint Marxism with libertarian ideology. Armed with this doctrine, Fontenis works for no one else but himself. Where is sincerity in that mixture of ambitions that binds the man who drives the organization and the organization that makes the man bigger ?”

Nevertheless, Fontenis still maintained some links with his last supporters. On June 22, 1958, the group of the former activists of the FCL adopted the name Action communiste; contacts are taken with Voie communiste, an internal opposition in the Communist Party Pablist Trotskyites and communist opponents where gathered, as well as with militants

of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie. Action Communiste disbanded in the summer of 1958 and rejoined Voie communiste. Fontenis joined the editorial staff of Voie communiste and continued to be an activist there for a few years.

The same year he was reinstated in the Education Board, due to a significant decrease of his militant activity. He could now spend time for his career and prepare the exam to be an Inspector of Education. In Fall 1959, he joined the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Saint-Cloud. He was afterwards appointed inspector in rural areas from 1962 to 1967 and professor of educational psychology at the Ecole normale of Tours.

In 1961, and against all odds, Fontenis made a brief stay in Freemasonry. Later, he said that he felt “neither shame nor regret” about it.

Starting from 1968, he resumed contact with the libertarian movement. In Tours, he helped to create the Comité d’action révolutionnaire (Committee of Revolutionary Action, [CAR]) and on May 1st, he launched with Pierre Morain a “Call to the veterans of the FCL and the UGAC” in which he proposed libertarian communist activists, anarchist-communist groups and critical Marxists to work towards a “common solution”. Fontenis soon created in Tours a libertarian communist group called “Action Tours” which immediately joined the UGAC.

In 1966, the UGAC published a “Letter to the international anarchist movement” in which they stated their belief that anarchism cannot assume the leadership in the revolutionary movement, and that it must just accept to be a component of a larger movement. The UGAC started then a frontist policy that led to alliances with Maoist or Pablists movements. In 1969, the UGAC, which no longer considered itself as a union of

groups, became a mere tendency and took the name of Tendence anarchiste communiste (TAC) (Anarchist Communist Tendency) which integrated a short-lived Comité d'initiative pour un mouvement révolutionnaire (CIMR) (Initiative committee for a revolutionary movement) alongside Alain Krivine, Daniel Bensaid and Henri Weber from the Jeunesses communistes révolutionnaires (JCR) (Revolutionary Communist Youth), some activists from the Pablist tendency as well as some PCF [Communist party] dissidents.

Activists from the TAC, from the Anarchist Communist Youth and veterans from the FCL held in Paris on May 10 and May 11, 1969 the founding congress of the Mouvement Communiste libertaire (MCL) (Libertarian Communist Movement). One could find there, among others, Fontenis whose reappearance caused a stir, Daniel Guérin (who had just published *Pour un marxisme libertaire* (Laffont publisher), in which he wrote in particular: “While taking a bath of anarchism, Marxism today can get cleaned of its pustules and be regenerated”), Alexandre Skirda and Roland Biard. Fontenis was responsible for drafting the founding text of the organization; he would later write about the MCL that it was a kind of “synthesis” of “certain contributions of Marxism, working class libertarian workerism and council communism”.

Besides the problematic presence of Fontenis who, by his mere presence could endanger the future of the MCL, and the marginal place of the anarchist movement, tensions arose from the beginning between platformist, spontaneist, council communist and neo-situationist tendencies. The MCL quickly withered away before the end of 1969, without realizing an ideological unity nor being able to capture the rebellious youth.

The MCL and the ORA (Revolutionary Anarchist Organization, another tendency created in 1968 inside the FA,

which will split and form a specific organization in 1970) tried a reconciliation that failed in spite of the intervention and mediation of Daniel Guérin. In July, a group of MCL joined the ORA while four groups of the ORA joined the MCL and gave birth to the first Organisation communiste libertaire (OCL-1) (Libertarian Communist Organisation-1) at a conference in Marseille on 10 and 11 July 1971. This same Congress adopted a text proposed by Fontenis, which was published in the November issue of *Guerre de classe* (class war) under the title *Libertarian Communist Platform of 1971*.

From the beginning, the OCL-1 maintains contacts with a group called the Marxist Left, around themes favorable to council communism. The OCL-1 had quite an agitated existence, constantly torn between conflicting trends. In 1974, Guérin left the OCL-1 for the ORA while Fontenis continued to militate in the group: the Tours group of which he was a member was then assuming the secretariat of the organization. The OCL-1, reinforced by the arrival of two groups which had split from the ORA, founded *Rupture*, a new bulletin dedicated to discussion and confrontation, which stated that it intended to contribute to the “elaboration of the communist project, to the emergence of a radical communist movement”. This, “ultra-left Marxist-Luxemburgist and councilist” orientation will lead them to what will be called “autonomy”. In 1976, the OCL-1, which had been gradually disintegrating, decided its dissolution on November 28.

After the 1974 strikes in the banking sector, in the railways and post offices, a new workerist and syndicalist tendency appeared in the ORA. This tendency, called Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires (UTCL) (Libertarian communist Workers' Union), criticized the ultra-left drifts of ORA (in particular its anti-unionism) and its political confusion

(disagreements on questions of nationality, of regionalism and the national liberation struggles, splits in 1971 of militants to small Maoist groups and exclusions in 1972 of militants supporting the “unique revolutionary candidacy”, most of them joining Lutte ouvrière and the Ligue communiste!).

In 1976, the ORA Congress in Orleans confirmed the exclusion of the UTCL tendency and renamed itself Organisation communiste libertaire (Libertarian Communist Organisation) (OCL-2 called also “second manner”), whose parentage corresponds to the present OCL, which publishes the monthly paper *Courant Alternatif* from 1980 on). The OCL-2 publishes *Front libertaire* and a first issue of *Pour l'autonomie ouvrière et l'abolition du salariat* (For workers autonomy and the abolition of wage labor).

In April 1976, those excluded from the ORA create a “collective for the UTCL” and in May give themselves a newspaper: *Tout le pouvoir aux travailleurs* (All Power to the workers).

On 25 and 26 February 1978, Fontenis attended the founding congress of the UTCL as a simple supporter, the UTCL being no longer a tendency but an organization. Daniel Guérin did adhere immediately while Fontenis got his formal membership only in November 1980 and was active in the Tours group.

Over the following years, various libertarian communist groups aggregated the UTCL, among which the Libertarian Communist-led Collectif jeunes libertaires (Collective of young libertarians) which was created during the high school and university student movement against the Devaquet law in

1986². In 1989 a unification process was engaged and a “Call for a libertarian alternative” was published in the May issue of *Lutter* (Fight) and signed by more than a hundred activists.

In 1991, UTCL and CJL disbanded and merged into a new organization: Alternative libertaire (Libertarian Alternative) which published a *Manifesto for a libertarian alternative* and the monthly.

In 1990, Fontenis published his memoirs under the title *The Other Communism, a subversive history of the libertarian movement* (Acratie Publisher). In 2008, a revised proofread and expanded edition was published by the Alternative Libertaire éditions under the title *Change the world. History of the libertarian communist movement, 1945-1997*.

In 2002 Fontenis self-published *Non conforme* (Not conform) (Editions Bénévent), welcomed in December with “some uneasiness” in *Alternative libertaire* by Guillaume Davranche and Patrice Spadoni, who wrote: “Alas, if Georges Fontenis always has a concern for ‘breaking taboos’ he does not do it in *Non conforme* with much relevance. The exercise turns out into a search for an iconoclastic posture which most often misses its target, when it does not altogether go astray. The purpose is confused and ambiguous on certain societal issues. Ultimately, Georges Fontenis wants to ask non conform questions but the ambivalent writing of his answers might lead readers to conclusions too conform to... the dominant

² The “Devaquet Bill” was a bill introduced in 1986 by the Minister Alain Devaquet and intended to reform French universities. The project intended to create a selection of the students entering universities, and to put the universities in competition. Highly contested in November and December 1986 during a high school and student movement particularly marked by the death of Malik Oussekiné, the project was withdrawn December 8, 1986. (Translator’s note.)

ideology.” Fontenis sent a vehement protest in the following issue of January 2003. He stayed a member of *Alternative Libertaire* in Tours, and since his health was deteriorating, he gradually withdrew from all militant activity.

As an activist in the *Libre pensée*³ in Indre-et-Loire, he participated actively in the collective against the Pope's visit to Tours in 1996. On this occasion, he was seen dressed as a Pope, George Ist parading in a “papamobile” in the heart of the anticlerical demonstration, an image that will be shown in the television news.

While still an activist of the *Ecole émancipée*⁴, he joined *Sud Education*⁵ when the union was created. In 2008 was released the DVD of a filmed interview of Fontenis made by Franck Wolff under the title *Libertarian course*. He was publicly seen one last time during the screening of the documentary in Tours on February 21, 2009.

He undoubtedly has been a prominent and decisive figure in the libertarian movement of the second half of the twentieth century. More than six decades of presence and activism – from pre-war *Union anarchiste* and post-war *Fédération anarchiste*, then the *OPB*, the *FCL*, *Voie communiste*, the *UGAC*, the *MCL*, the *OCL-1*, the *UTCL* to *AL* today – draw a rather

³ “*Libre pensée*” means Free thought. The first Free thought society in France was created in 1848 and grouped atheists, rationalists, humanists, agnostics, etc. They played for a long time a determinant part in the struggle against the hold of religion on society, and particularly in the law voted in 1905 separating the Church and the State. (Translator’s note.)

⁴ “*Emancipated School*”. A historical current of the French teaching union originally close to anarcho-syndicalism. It also is a magazine, which has been published since 1910. (Translator’s note.)

⁵ *SUD* (*Solidaires-Unitaires-Démocratiques*) is a union confederation created in 1981. (Translator’s note.)

outstanding journey. If he has largely contributed to the affirmation and to the autonomy of a self-sufficient libertarian communist current sailing between anarchist movement and leftism, he will be remembered especially for his authoritarian methods and his ideological excesses which marked one of the least glorious episodes of French anarchism. For some, the history of Fontenis still evokes a past difficult to assume and a rather cumbersome legacy, for the others he will remain the designated cause of a deep trauma that will affect the movement for a long time as well as the symbol of the deadly danger of leadership and political temptation for anarchism. Despite many deep enmities, both in the anarchist camp and in his own libertarian communist family, and recurring disagreements with the “historians” of the anarchist movement (Jean Maitron, Roland Biard, Alexandre Skirda, Frank Mintz), Fontenis defended to the end his version of the facts and justified his action, notably in his autobiography.

However, in a letter to Skirda written in March 1987, he maintained that “Facing those who condemned the anarchist movement to a slow degeneration, to decline, the FCL, thanks to the OPB, saved the honor and has permitted through many historical vicissitudes, the constitution of a libertarian communist movement whose permanence is evident today”. In June 2000, in an interview with Gilbert Estève for the magazine *Ecole émancipée*, he stated that “the essential is not to be disown” and he insisted: “As far as I’m concerned, I persist and sign.”

Georges Fontenis died in his ninetieth year on August 9, 2010 in his home in Reignac-sur-Indre, Indre-et-Loire.

Alternative libertaire wrote a press release entitled “Georges Fontenis: an international figure of libertarian communism has left us” to be distributed and which was read during the funeral.

The Anarchist Federation also sent a “message of sympathy to our comrades of Alternative Libertaire after the death of Georges Fontenis”. An obituary was published in *Le Monde*, 13 August 2010 signed by David Berry while the September 2010 issue of Alternative libertaire published several pages devoted to his memory.

Monde Libertaire
Julien (group of Rouen)