

## **Le Monde libertaire**

# **Georges Fontenis : Journey of an adventurist of the Libertarian movement <sup>1</sup>**

(Part 1)

Has there ever been a more sulphurous person as Georges Fontenis in the history of the French libertarian movement of the twentieth century? The man who delights to call himself “Satan” “Prince of Darkness», who, hardly a few years ago, visiting incognito the bookshop of the *Monde libertaire* handed a check to the shopkeeper, saying: “the Devil’s hand”! He, too, who will see his name assimilated in many historical articles and books to a kind of ideology, “Fontenism” and as an adjective: “Fontenist.”

Evoking George Fontenis is not an easy matter; there is on the subject an important literature, as diverse as passionate. Many autobiographical texts and academic theories, or even militant texts focusing on the history of the movement, deal with the character and very often their partisan arguments help build a myth concerning him.

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1 Source : *Monde Libertaire* n°1605 (23-29 septembre 2010) – Georges Fontenis : parcours d’un aventuriste du mouvement libertaire  
<http://www.monde-libertaire.fr/index.php?view=items&cid=5676:nd16...>

Maurice Joyeux wrote on that matter in the eighteenth issue of the Anarchist journal *La Rue* (The Street), a long article entitled “The Fontenis case”. In his introduction, he writes:

“For thirty years, there has been a myth in our community. This myth is about the ‘Fontenis affair’. A myth based on one man whose presence among us was relatively short, six or eight years at most, and who exercised authority only for half of that time. For activists who succeeded each other, Fontenis was the ‘bad guy’, the ‘werewolf’ of the fable, ‘the ugly one’ of the tragedy, ‘the Antichrist’ who not only frightened one generation, but also the following generations who had not known him but who recalls him whenever an ideological dispute shakes our movement. The character does not deserve such an ‘honor’, nor such consistency in this ‘classical’ role all human groups invent to get rid of the weight of their ‘sins’ and blame ‘Satan’ for their errors. I find ridiculous this use of ‘the Fontenis case’ by a number of our comrades to explain or justify disagreements. Resorting to the ‘evil’ is nothing but resorting to the irrational, and philosophy has taught us that only literature gives him the look of Goethe's Faust while he is in us and that this is where we need to uncover it, rather than give it both a fascinating and scary face. And if to exorcise the devil you just need to talk about him, as the good fathers say, then let us talk about the Fontenis case!”

One might be seduced by the thesis of a mythologized Georges Fontenis, a sort of scapegoat for the failures and the divisions of the anarchist movement, the alibi for some of his followers who rejected on him alone a somewhat cumbersome balance-sheet.

For if Fontenis certainly held the lead in this, nothing would have been possible without the blind obedience on the part of

his accomplices or the disturbing passivity and carelessness of the militants of an organization claiming anti-authoritarianism. Don't the anarchists say that where no one obeys, no one commands? If this episode met so much echo and if the evocation of Fontenis still causes so many activists to feel anxiety and anger, the reason is perhaps that it refers directly to a taboo, that of the danger of authoritarian and bureaucratic behaviors in the libertarian movement. In this brief account, and following the many more or less biased testimonies, or even the works of academic historians or activists, we shall try to carefully trace the route of George Fontenis.

## **From the first steps to the first responsibilities**

Evoking the life and action of Fontenis is also and most of all tracing the complex evolution of the "libertarian communist" sensitivity in the French anarchist movement from the Second World War to nowadays.

He was born April 14, 1920 in Paris from socialist and trade unionist parents. In 1936, he approached the libertarian movement during the June strikes and the Spanish Revolution. It is at a meeting held on Spain in Noisy-le-Sec that he met his first anarchist militants. He joined shortly after a group of young libertarians active in Noisy and adheres to the Anarchist Union (Union anarchiste, UA). During the war he became a teacher, managed to escape the STO<sup>2</sup> and joined the CGT<sup>3</sup> and the "Ecole émancipée"<sup>4</sup>. It is in this capacity that he participated in purification commissions of the National

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2 "Service du Travail Obligatoire", compulsory labor organized by the Germans.

3 Confédération générale du travail (General confederation of labour).

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.

Education in 1945. It is in the Ecole émancipée that will meet the anarchist militant Solange Dumont who will present him to the provisional Administrative Commission which was to lay the foundations for the reconstruction of the anarchist movement and to organize a national convention. Immediately integrated in the commission, he was appointed to organize the links between young activists and he became a member of the "Paris-Est" group. On October 6 and 7, 1945 was held the convention of the libertarian movement and on December 12 took place the founding congress of the Anarchist Federation (FA). Georges Fontenis contributed to the creation of the Federation of Libertarian Youth and became its secretary at its founding congress. He is also responsible for animating the theoretical training for young members. The FA grows rapidly while *Le Libertaire*, once more a weekly, has a circulation of tens of thousand and prances top seller.

On September 13, 14 and 15, 1946 is held at Dijon the second congress of the FA, which sees the pre-war divisions reappearing and faction conflicts exacerbating.

While the Congress strains to name a new secretariat, Fontenis is, against all odds, offered the function of General Secretary. He is a new and irreproachable man; his youth, his status as a teacher, as well as the fact that he does not belong to any of the competing clans, quickly creates a large and unexpected consensus. At only 26 years old he became General Secretary of the FA and the young editor of "Le Libertaire". The same Congress also decided the creation of a commission of self-defense. Kept secret, it had to fight against police as well as Stalinist or fascist infiltration and intoxication. It was to prepare the clandestine struggle in case of totalitarian seizure of power or in case of a Third World War.

The commission will constantly be under the responsibility of Fontenis, whether he be reappointed or not in his capacity as general secretary. In 1947, Fontenis is reappointed as General

Secretary at the end of the third congress held in Angers. He is then on temporary leave (unpaid) of the Education nationale <sup>5</sup> and can give all his time to the FA and *Le Libertaire*, of which he became permanent editor.

Georges Fontenis becomes a member of the dynamic young French Confédération nationale du travail (CNT-f) and is appointed as its secretary to the federation of education. In 1950, he left the declining CNT-f and while he still is a member of the Ecole émancipée, he joined the Federation Nationale de l'Education (FEN).

The fourth congress held in 1948 in Lyon appointed him once more as general secretary. This congress also decided to create *La Revue anarchiste* of which he will also be responsible.

That same year, he participated in an attempt to assassinate General Franco, with Spanish anarchists in exile. His part was limited to signing the act of purchase of a light aircraft Norécrin which will be transformed into a bomber piloted by three Spanish militants among whom was the famous "general with neither god nor master", Antonio Ortiz <sup>6</sup>. The attack narrowly failed: when they were about to drop the bombs stolen from a Luftwaffe depot on Franco's residence located in the bay of San Sebastian, two, then four, then six fighters arrived and forced the Norecrin to flee. The attempt will not be renewed. Fontenis was later questioned about the case by the DST <sup>7</sup> which decided not to proceed.

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5 Education Board.

6 Concerning Antonio Ortiz, see : "La folle épopée d'Antonio Ortiz", *A contretemps* No 5, Novembre 2001 [www.acontretemps.plusloin.org](http://www.acontretemps.plusloin.org). Account of the film by Ariel CAMACHO, Phil CASOAR, Laurent GUYOT, *Ortiz, général sans dieu ni maître, Première partie : "Nosotros" (53'56") - Seconde partie : "C'est toi le chef!" (54'56")*

iO Production 1, C9 Télévision, 1996.

7 Direction de la sûreté du territoire, counter-intelligence on the French territory.

## The OPB and the infiltration of the FA

In the summer of 1949 took place near Cannes, in a youth hostel run by the couple Jose and Renee Salame, a “training course” with several Libertarian communists. The discussions concluded that it was necessary to form a secret fraction. The “Organisation Pensée Bataille” (Thought-Battle Organisation) (OPB), from a book by Camillo Berneri, was created in January 1950. The OPB is a clandestine organization within the FA, it is based, according to Fontenis, on “the need for a highly structured organization, combining ideological unity, tactical unity and class nature” in order to “put an end to the domination within the FA of individualist and synthesist trends which were opposed to change and imposed their confusionism”.

For that, it became necessary to fight and move away those who were be qualified as “muddled” and “worthless”, “purist” and “windy”, “liberal”, in order to “transform the anarchist movement as much as possible in the direction of an efficient and serious organization defending a coherent body of doctrine” (Statutes of the OPB). In his book *Autonomie individuelle et force collective – Les anarchistes et l’organisation, de Proudhon à nos jours*, Alexandre Skirda asserts that the vigilante group, turning away from its original mission and taking advantage of the secrecy surrounding its operations, will be the crucible of the OPB.

Fontenis became, from its setting up to its dissolution, the secretary of the board, also known as “responsible for th plan”. The membership to the OPB was done by co-optation after investigation of the past of the future militant, on proposition of two sponsors. Its members were bound to secrecy and strict obedience, the bureau of the OPB checked the strict application of instructions; the statutes specified up to a stupefying point

that “any active militant, suspended or expelled or resigning, must observe absolute secrecy on the OPB and the activists within it. Failure in this regard involves the necessary legal steps by the OPB and up to the elimination in the event of denunciation endangering the safety of the militants”!

The OPB rapidly infiltrated all the positions in the FA; each meeting, each congress were prepared in advance and the decisions of the OPB became systematically the decisions of the FA<sup>8</sup>.

The fifth congress held in Paris in 1950 establishes in the organization the vote on the basis of one vote for one militant, instead of the voting by group, but the positions remain indicative and are not binding for opposing groups. Fontenis keeps the General Secretariat of the Federation.

At the sixth congress of the FA, in Lille, Fontenis announced he did not want to be renewed in his office of General Secretary after five years of consecutive terms. Claiming he wanted to make room for the young, he proposed Andre Moine as his successor, like him a member of the Paris-Est group and of the OPB. Moine was appointed without the slightest difficulty. In fact, Fontenis did not give up anything at the Lille congress, and for good reasons: the OPB was fully operational and had placed and imposed its followers in eight of the nine secretariats, while the responsibilities of the

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8 The OPB was obviously modelled on a typical bolchevik invention, the “fraction”, officialised in July 1920 during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the Komintern. Communist parties were ordered to create, within the mass organizations, and mainly the workers unions, groups of party members meeting seperately in order to organize communist control of the trade unions. Such practices were so totally foreign to working class traditions that the communist union militants were very reluctant about them and it took a long time for the communist leaders to achieve their aim. The difference with the OPB is that the latter and the Federation anarchiste it intended to control were both supposed to be anarchist, and that the Federation anarchiste was practically considered as an ennemi.

Peasant, of the Workers committees, and the reading commission of the *Libertaire* also went to OPB activists.

In May 1952, Fontenis asked to meet with Maurice Joyeux, a member of the group that was then the most important of the FA: the Louise-Michel group of the 18<sup>th</sup> district of Paris. The rendez-vous, which took place in a side lane of the Buttes-Chaumont<sup>9</sup>, was worthy of an old spy movie. Without disclosing the existence of the OPB, Fontenis wanted to discover the attitude of Joyeux and of the unavoidable Louise-Michel group for the next Congress. Fontenis wanted to offer Joyeux a kind of double leadership of the FA, the intellectual leadership being naturally attributed to Fontenis, the other, working-class, being attributed to Joyeux. The latter's refusal would oblige Fontenis and the OPB, without realizing it then, to get rid of Joyeux and of the Louise-Michel group.

In June 1952, at the Congress held in Bordeaux, Fontenis and the OPB took advantage of the division to obtain on each vote a majority for all the leading positions, while was adopted a resolution on orientation and tactics prepared by the OPB, amended until the last moment and of a clearly libertarian communist inspiration. In October, a first scission of opponents occurred: besides, exclusions were imposed on Joyeux, Aristide and Paul Lapeyre, Fayolle, Arru, Vincey, etc. These activists then grouped together in October 1952, within the "Entente anarchiste" (Anarchist Agreement), an "instrument intended to connect, without any exclusivity, federations, groups and individuals, adhering to anarchism". In its first issue, Raymond Beaulaton wrote: "The unity of anarchism after the war was quickly broken. Two years ago, at the Congress of Paris, the consultation system was established by vote. In two years, this unit was destroyed." From 1952 to 1953, Fontenis wrote in the *Libertaire* a long series of articles under the header "Key

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9 A big hilly parc in the North of Paris.



issues”, while after the eviction of Maurice Joyeux, he took on the leading article of the newspaper.

## **The creation of the FCL**

The Congress of Paris of May 23, 24 and 25, 1953 will see the completion of the take-over operation of the FA and the culmination of the strategy of the OPB and of its leader George Fontenis. The last groups refusing to submit to the political line of the OPB were excluded (groups of Asnieres, Louise-Michel and Bordeaux). The FA became the “Fédération communiste libertaire” (Libertarian Communist Federation) (FCL) by a majority vote of 71 against 61 mandates (the other names which had been proposed were “Communist Anarchist Party” and “Libertarian Communist Party!”). From then on, members are required to publicly defend the Congress resolutions, even if they voted against. The FCL thus collected the results of all the reconstruction efforts of the anarchist movement since the Liberation: the newspaper, the shop on the Quai de Valmy and the cash.

The title of the *Libertaire*, which had become the “organ of the Federation communiste libertaire” is now printed in red instead of black, symbolic expression of the break with the “old” anarchist movement. In fact, the FCL included only sixteen groups and about 130 to 160 militants under the control of the OPB. Soon, the collective character of the OPB had given way to the authority of one man, its “Commissioner of the plan”, Fontenis. The initial tensions, that others qualify as rivalries, appeared in the libertarian communist camp, especially from activists belonging to the Kronstadt group, which protested against the excesses of authoritarianism and the “Fontenis deviation”. In March 1953, they were excluded from the OPB (of the seventeen founding members of the OPB, only six were still members in 1954, three of whom were

always the same three members of the bureau). The Kronstadt group published in August 1954 a memorandum of 82 pages denouncing publicly, in detail and for the first time, the existence of the secret organization OPB and the Leninist orientation of the FCL. This group in turn will be excluded from the FCL in March 1955.

## **Between anarchism and Leninism**

At the beginning of May 1953, a collection of articles written by Fontenis in the header “Key issues” under the title “Manifeste du communisme libertaire” (Manifesto of libertarian communism). A barely modified version of this text will be adopted by the Congress of the FCL a few days later as a “Declaration of Principles” of the new organization that will dedicate the new orientation of the FCL:

“The specific organization of the libertarian communist militants considers itself as the vanguard, the conscious and active minority expressing in its ideology and action the aspirations of the proletariat ...”

Concerning Fontenis’ “Libertarian Communist Manifesto”, Jean Maitron, in his history of the anarchist movement in France <sup>10</sup>, mentions an “effort of synthesis between anarchism and Leninism”. Roland Biard, in his history of the anarchist movement <sup>11</sup>, says about the “Manifesto” that “this text, under the appearance of platformism actually was an apology for the vanguard and contained a significantly Leninist orientation”. Alexandre Skirda in his book mentioned above, questions the

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10 Jean Maitron, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France* (Éditions Maspéro, 1982).

11 Roland Biard, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste, 1945-1975* (Editions Galilee, 1976).

purpose of that Manifesto, wondering whether it was addressed to the anarchist movement in order to bolshevize it, or if he wanted to touch working class activists, supporters and dissidents of the PCF<sup>12</sup>, so as to “anarchise” them.

This latter option seems to be confirmed through the strategy of the FCL, when it published in January 1954, a Worker’s program denounced by the Kronstadt group as a “pale copy” of the program claimed by the CGT. This tendency to take the PCF and the CGT as models will become a constant *leitmotive*. This orientation is confirmed by the attitude of Fontenis who, as soon as November 1953, no longer hesitated to express his deepest thoughts: “The libertarian communist doctrine is more actually based on dialectical materialism than are the political positions of Marxism<sup>13</sup>.”

He also begins to participate in the Marxist group and magazine *Socialisme et Barbarie*<sup>14</sup>, close to Council Communism, with a first article, “Presence in the unions”, in the October issue of 1954. In June 1954, a short-lived Libertarian Communist International (ICL) held its first and only conference in Paris. Three countries were then represented (France, Italy and Spain, and some observers) but only one organization, the FCL. The issue of developing a new “Popular Front” or “Workers' Front” is discussed. In May 1955, in this perspective, the *Libertaire* widely opened its columns to André Marty, MP and leader of the PCF [*Communist Party*] who had just been excluded. Similarly, the FCL participated in July 1956 in a meeting jointly with the Communist MP René Bellanger, and the *Libertaire* published a “Call for the united front of the revolutionaries” which members of the FCL and Trotskyists of various currents signent.

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12 Parti communiste français, the French Communist Party.

13 Does Fontenis suggest that Libertarian communism “invented” “dialectical matérialism” ? For Marx NEVER uses this expression.

14 Socialism and Barbarism.

## The decline of the FCL

Activists and groups excluded from the FA quickly pulled themselves together: from December 25 to December 27, 1953 was held in Paris a conference bringing together 56 groups. The conference organized the reconstruction of the new FA (which took the name of the abandoned FCL) and adopts a new journal: *Le Monde libertaire* (The Libertarian World), whose first monthly issue was published in October 1954. The FCL, which had seized the treasury of the FA, its headquarters, its bookshop and most of all the weekly *Libertarian* will survive until 1956 and its participation in parliamentary elections in January of that year. As early as February 1955, the issue of participation in elections had been raised.

A motion was unanimously accepted: “The electoral battle has become a form of class struggle, can we not consider this issue as a question of tactics related to the circumstances and facts of the social struggle?”. In the Internal Bulletin of April, a nine-page article signed by F. (Fontenis?) entitled “For revolutionary practicisim”<sup>15</sup> states: “We can participate in electoral contests – we shall take care then not to assume positions of legislators but of agitators. We see this as a form of agitation that can not be overlooked<sup>16</sup>.”

The discussion began in May and the Congress accepted the turnout at a strong enough majority (only the groups of Grenoble and Macon will oppose and will leave the FCL). At the legislative elections of January 2, 1956, the FCL had ten candidates among whom Fontenis and André Marty. The *Libertaire* titles “The FCL into the fight”, while Maurice Joyeux, in *Le Monde libertaire*, responded with a scathing “The FCL into shit!” Finally, the libertarian communist list

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15 “Practicisme” in the French text.

16 This is exactly what the German social-democracy said at the beginning.

reaped 2219 votes, or about 0.5% of the votes, while the adventure will be very expensive. The *Libertaire* of January 19 states that “the FCL is more than a million for the costs of the election campaign”. Some militants from the Kronstadt group, excluded from the FCL, founded in November 1955 the Black and Red group and the review of the same name. They will create, in 1956, with the Macon and Grenoble groups, the “Groupes anarchistes d’action révolutionnaire» (Gaar) (Anarchist groups of revolutionary action). These same groups, and others, will get back into the FA in 1961 in an organized tendency, the Union of Communist Anarchists Groups (Ugac). “The purpose of the Ugac is not, like Fontenis, to eliminate these trends by secret and bureaucratic practices, but to take the lead, to form an active core which in practice as in theory should supplant them” (Rolland, *Le Monde libertaire*, October 1962). Despite a rather commendable initial approach, the maneuvers to access to power as well as the publication of a secret bulletin will revive bad memories and quickly create tensions.

Maurice Laisant denounces the “Ugac acting like an external organization aiming only at infiltrating and conquering the FA”. Qualified as a “Leninist type of fraction” by Joyeux, the Ugac, drawing the lessons of its failure, left the FA in 1964.

The last major campaign of the FCL, which no doubt precipitated its end, was its full support to Algerian independence. In a kind of wild rush forward, the FCL fell headlong into the fight, after which followed a string of trials, seizures and arrests of Libertarian activists, among whom Pierre Morain, who was jailed. Activists from the FCL carried suitcases for the Mouvement national algérien (MNA) (Algerian National Movement) of Messali Hadj and for the Front de liberation nationale (FLN) of Ahmed Ben Bella (who will become the first president of the Algerian independent state). Between October and December 1956, Fontenis was

convicted no less than ten times in Court for complicity of public insults and defamation against the police, army and State, provocation to military disobedience... He already accounted for 19 months in prison and nearly 900,000 francs of fines. The *Libertaire*, exhausted by almost systematic seizures and fines, had lost most of its readers; it ceased publication in July 1956. The FCL went dormant never to wake up. Some activists, including Fontenis, went underground. In July 1958, the DST ended his run and, after several weeks of military barracks, he was given bail before being granted an amnesty decree from General de Gaulle applying to all the facts concerning the war in Algeria.

So under the combined effects of departures and exclusions of disagreeing groups and activists, using authoritarian methods, Leninist and vanguardist abuses or, on the contrary, attracted to Trotskyism, the disaffection caused by the piteous election episode, and finally the suppression linked to the support to Algerian nationalist struggles, ended the story of the Federation communiste libertaire.

Julien  
(Rouen group of the Fédération anarchiste)