The French Anarchist Movement

Giovanna Berneri

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*When **Georges Fontenis** (1920–2010) died earlier this year, he was hailed for his dedication to the revolutionary cause. During his lifetime he was a controversial figure who played a divisive role in the French anarchist movement, seeking to create a unified anarchist movement based an adherence to a common platform, essentially a more traditional leftist form of organization resembling a political party. Predictably, his efforts met with much resistance from many anarchists and split rather than united the French anarchist movement. Giovanna Berneri (1897–1962), veteran anarchist activist, widow of Camillo Berneri and mother of **Marie Louise Berneri*** (**Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas**, *Volume Two, Selections 4, 15 & 75), criticizes Fontenis' approach and reviews its results in this article from 1954, an English translation of which was originally published in **David Wieck's** anarchist journal,* **Resistance** *(see Volume Two, Selections 38, 39 & 40).*

The French Anarchist Movement

In the French movement — or, to be exact, in the important segment associated with the French Anarchist Federation — many of the young people who played a very active part in the post-war period were motivated chiefly by negative concerns: particularly, their unwillingness to put up with the discipline the already existing parties imposed. These young people didn't see much worth in the deep unchanging impulses which have been the heart of anarchism. Of the basic anarchist ideas, they assimilated — and badly — only those which seemed somehow to jibe with their passion to lead a political army. Living in a time when authoritarian ideas were ascendant everywhere, they believed — and no doubt many believed it sincerely — that the strength of the movement, and the influence of its ideas on society, depended on it achieving organizational and ideological unity. So they tried to organize the French anarchists, except those who chose to remain in groups outside the FAF, into a centralized structure in which the ideas of a single person, or small group, could prevail. This organization had to be provided also — naturally — with a disciplinary machinery able to ensure the absolute fidelity of the members and the exclusion of non-conformists. For anarchism, which demands room to breathe, the broadest possible horizons, and the rejection of fixed structures, all this was the ultimate absurdity.

One more example, really, of the typical Communist splinter-group: Absolutely, they say, the proletariat must be led by a party, but this party must be led by me — or us — as the vanguard Elite.

In this case the elite was very small. To make their will and plans prevail, they took possession of the responsible jobs in the central organization, and gradually transformed these into posts of command. They gained absolute control of the editorial and business management of the newspaper and internal bulletin — of the means, that is, for "tending the souls" of the militants, of domesticating them, of giving them predeformed information about events in the FAF, of pushing them into that ideological unity around a new Catechism which was said to be the only way to save the unity and cohesion of the organization. So powerful did this intolerance and sectarianism become, that everybody who disagreed with the tactics and ideology of *Quai de Valmy* had to go. Those who tried to resist were expelled. All this, to repeat, is the usual story of the political sect, of the Bordighist and Trotskyist groups and the like. So that finally there was really nothing strange in the decision to change the name of the FAF to the Libertarian Communist Federation (FCL) and in the explicit repudiation of the word "anarchism" in its official organ.

From the premise that *Le Libertaire* was aimed at a non-anarchist public, they had deduced, logically and absurdly, that criticism and challenge of its peculiar official viewpoint could not be printed in it. Writings which contradicted the line of the little *équipe* were not published. The paper became, therefore, more and more *political* and agitational. Elementary anarchist ideas, such as the need for diversity of opinions and activities, disappeared and were supplanted by propaganda campaigns accompanied by vigorous drum-beating, based on rhetorical slogans, and intended to make people stand up and yell and not to make them think. Exactly the wrong way around. More and more openly, the paper has sought to implant the idea that between

the Communist Party's ideology and anarchist ideas there is more affinity than difference, and that divergence in action has been due to human errors and not to differences in theory. Thus the "parallel texts" — very carefully selected — from Bakunin and Engels, etc.; culminating in the recent episode of Jean Masson's article on "the meaning of the Djilas affair."

In analyzing Milovan Djilas' expulsion from the Central Committee of the Yugoslav CP, Masson developed the familiar Leninist thesis of the role of the vanguard party, the revolutionary organization of the masses to wield a dictatorship in the name of the victorious proletariat. One more translation of Lenin into anarchist terms. In this case the protests within the organization itself seem to have been unusually vigorous and numerous, and the incident was closed with an impudent rectification.

This attempt to sell Communist goods among anarchists was so blatant that it couldn't be kept quiet. The CRIA (Commission for International Anarchist Relations) felt obliged to invite the FCL delegate to state his position on Masson's article. *Le Libertaire* then tried to claim that the theses on dictatorship and the party were Tito's and not Masson's: which implied that the heavy thinkers at the *Quai de Valmy* take all the readers of the paper to be perfect cretins, since one has only to read the article to see that the explanation is utterly absurd.

Another recent incident is one more proof of the sectarian methods and authoritarian purposes of the FCL leaders.

In October, 1953, [Georges] Fontenis, the little boss of the organization, was invited by the Spanish groups in Paris to present his views on anarchist organization to a meeting of comrades. One member of the audience felt he had to express his disagreement with Fontenis: he felt it a duty, in fact, because he was still a member of the FCL. He said it wasn't right to quote Berneri to justify these Marxist ideas (it's always the same dishonest game: to use Bakunin, Malatesta or Berneri to put over something quite different), and that this kind of distortion of ideas explained why authoritarianism and centralism reigned within the anarchists' organization.

These statements were enough to send Fontenis' critic, together with another comrade who spoke up at the same lecture, before the *Commission de Conflit* (a kind of internal tribunal, or purge commission, of the FCL), which decided for expulsion. Why? Because they had "publicly" — that was not true, since the lecture was in the headquarters of the Spanish organization — criticized the tactical-ideological "line" adopted by the last Congress, a line that responsible members of the organization were obliged to defend whether they agreed with it or not.

From 1950 forward, the bolshevization of the French anarchist organization, by means of intolerance and sectarianism, has progressed steadily and noticeably. Evidence of growing uneasiness in the groups and regional federations has been increasingly present at the annual congresses. The frankly dishonest methods used by the little *équipe* in its political manoeuvres were becoming known to many militants, despite the efforts to hide and disguise them. The militants began to see that the shadowy doings at the *Quai de Valmy* were something other than anarchism. Opposition began to develop, until many individuals and even some groups, in Paris and in the provinces, took a stand.

But the thinner the ranks grew (Fontenis' following now seems to be around 250 persons), and the more the circulation of the paper declined (probably 5,000 copies are now printed, many unsold [translator's note: at one time, *Le Libertaire* was printing 40,000 copies a week]), the more verbally revolutionary has the tone of oratory and articles become. Even if — for example — the "third front" campaign, carried on with great furor, has left no trace except in the sensational Jacobin-style headlines of *Libertaire*, in the newspaper files in libraries.

Fontenis' elite guard has itself — it must be said — contributed directly to clearing up the situation. As mentioned, the 1953 Congress of the FAF gave up a word which no longer had any meaning for the leaders of the organization: "anarchist." The FAF designated itself the FCL. Now we have an exact definition of what the little group around Fontenis is. As there are "Catholic Communists," or "internationalist Communists," so in France around Fontenis, holding as gospel the Libertarian Communist Manifesto — a mishmash of a few pages in which all problems and difficulties are disposed of out of hand — there are the "libertarian communists." Now there is no longer even a formal contradiction between the Statutes of the organization, in which the Leninist principles are re-affirmed, and the activities of the new "leaders," and the name they have given themselves.

About the work of the group installed in the *Quai de Valmy* there can no longer be any doubt: they are not working for anarchism but for communism, which means, against anarchism.

At this point the militants who had quit the FAF and had remained apart, and those who had been criticizing the viewpoint and methods of action of the little elite, realized that the only way to deal with the increasingly bolshevik activities of the pseudo-anarchist organization was to re-group themselves and develop their own activity.

On December 25, 26 and 27, 1953, a meeting of opponents of the FCL was held at Paris, and reconstituted the FAF on the basis of clear and honest declarations.

I am not so naive as to base many hopes on the verbal results of a congress. Anyone who has been in the anarchist movement for years, and has taken part in a few congresses, knows the tendency to be satisfied with fine theoretical declarations and to formulate "plans of action" for which means of realization don't exist. But the FAF congress of last December, even after minimizing it as much as possible, has meaning and importance.

It is the first attempt on any scale (an *Entente Anarchiste* had been created among opponents of the FAF at a meeting in Mans in 1952) by militants of frankly differing tendencies to bring back to life the anarchism which, if it is not to contradict itself at the start, must do these things: have absolute faith in liberty, repudiate every expression of the principle of authority within it, and be broad and accepting toward ideas which, though not coming from anarchists, imply desires akin to and a direction parallel to our own. These are the characteristics which alone can set our movement apart from the political jungle of our days, from the "left" parties and organizations which are at the service of today's or tomorrow's rulers. This is the only way to free ourselves from the aridity of political action, where we are beforehand condemned to futility, so that we can move forward on the multiple levels — not organizable from a Center — of social, personal and local actions, on the job and with our neighbours, freely and with liberating effects.

The French militants in opposition to the FCL have set to work in the revived FAF. They hope to issue a new publication, and to renew and carry on the spirit and work of Louise Michel, Sébastien Faure and all those who gave themselves to defend and clarify anarchist ideas. We know this won't be easy. In the nearly complete ruin of moral values which authority has brought in our time, anarchism is the last ditch of a radical defence of the remaining vitality, and the beginning of its rebirth. They have to do pioneer work, starting almost from zero (and this is true also for us Italians). Like all pioneer work, it requires clarity and courage, tenacity and uprightness, devotion and sacrifice, and no illusory hope of easy, great, early results.

As I have already mentioned, other groupings within the French movement, but outside the FAF, are active. The existence outside the principal organization of smaller groups, united by affinity of ideas, is characteristic of all anarchist movements. In France there are the groups

which publish the papers *Défense de l'homme*, *Contre courant*, *L'Unique*: the first primarily pacifist, the second more integrally anarchist, the third an expression of a typically French individualist tendency.

We must also mention certain groups in Paris and the provinces which oppose the FCL, but are seeking to draw the conclusions of their experience with the "central," and tend to remain autonomous, that is to belong to no organization but keep in close touch with all. In Paris a noteworthy group is the Kronstadt Group, composed mostly of intelligent young people animated by serious intentions, which may constitute a good promise for the future.

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***Volontà*, May 1954**

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