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Obituary

# François Vercammen (1944-2015) - Internationalist, theoretician and activist

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**François Vercammen longstanding leader of the Fourth International and its Belgian section died on June 16 2015. Previous tributes were published by International Viewpoint shortly after his death [here](#).** Here we publish the contribution of Jan Malewski, editor of Inprecor and member of the Bureau of the Fourth International made at the memorial meeting held in Brussels on July 3.

I met François in July 1980, but from 1991-92 onwards I had the pleasure of working under his guidance, when Ernest Mandel convinced him to come and work at the International Bureau in Paris. Having already been a professional revolutionary for thirty years at that point, François had thought he should "recycle himself", get a stable job and leave the leadership to younger comrades...

Coming several days a week to Paris, he often spent the night with us or at Alain Krivine's place. There was then the opportunity to discuss without an agenda, and also to take the time to talk quietly, to share what we had been reading.

Working with François was a pleasure. He had that ability – which is so rare – to encourage others to have confidence in themselves. He listened to those with whom he spoke, helping them to formulate their ideas better... I never saw him devalue someone, even if he thought that their rantings didn't make any sense... He let the other person speak, even if it took some time, then one or two weeks later, he asked a question that forced them to think again about what they had put forward in discussion with him...

In the leadership of the International, François had participated from 1981 to 1985, along with Pierre Rousset, in the creation of the International Institute for Research and education in Amsterdam. As Sally and Pierre Rousset wrote, it was a centre "where activists coming from five continents and belonging to political currents with a diversity of traditions could meet together for several months to study, to go over together all the past history of socialist struggle, to reflect on their own experiences of struggles and the lessons from them. (...) So in many respects, the Amsterdam Institute's sessions represented a shared experience of pluralism within the radical Left - a pluralism which is also an essential component of internationalism." [1] François shared this opinion.

In charge of Europe within the International from 1992, he was one of those who – along with Alain Krivine and Roseline Vachetta, MEPs elected in 1999, and with European activists of the International – initiated cooperation between organizations "on the left of the left", combative trade unionists and social movements, in a pluralistic context. This led to regular meetings of the European Anti-Capitalist Left - the EACL. It was a pluralistic framework. It also contributed to getting activists from organizations which in their own countries rubbed shoulders without really working together, to begin to exchange ideas and sometimes take steps to regroup. For example, at a meeting of the European Anti-Capitalist Left in Paris in 2003, a dozen Greek organizations were there side by side ... some of them went on to found Syriza and others, later on, Antarsya - two groupings that reversed the tendency of the radical left in that country to splinter.

François was the one who was talking to everyone, going to meet them in their countries, helping them to establish links with each other.

Engaged since he was quite young in the attempt to build a revolutionary party in Belgium and on an international level, François had carefully studied the writings and actions of Lenin. He considered that Lenin had developed, "almost unwillingly, a particular kind of Marxism, revolutionary and operational, whose striking feature was the

separation and the specific articulation between the general level (the theory, the general analysis of society, the broad historical perspectives, political forecasts, programmatic and organizational principles) and the particular level (centred on the political orientation, with the conjunctural analysis, the slogans and the demands, the practical system of organization)." [2]

It was such a revolutionary and operational Marxism that François wanted to practise. As a theoretician, he had - like Lenin, he said - "a deep understanding of the subordinate role of any theoretical construct" and sought to identify "the practical meaning of each argument, each theoretical construct." He considered that "the famous 'theoretical flexibility' of Lenin was not a question of pragmatism", that the "sharp turn" was not "circumstantial", that it demanded a reappraisal of arguments at every level, and hence a reorganization of thought " [3]

It was in this framework, during the 1990s, while he was working on regrouping the radical Left in Europe, that François got down to analyzing the transformations of the European Union. The process was at that time accelerating, with the combination of the Single Act (1985) and the Maastricht Treaty (1991-1992). He quickly grasped that "the struggle against neoliberalism and for a social alternative is a struggle against the European Union" and that "in this context, a profound crisis of European institutions seems inevitable; the outcome should not be a falling back on the national framework, but another Europe". [4]

Nearly two decades later, this crisis is taking place, with Greece as weak link, and the referendum to be held on Sunday is an attempt to avoid being trapped in the national framework by fighting for another Europe.

Contrary to the analytical tradition of some Marxists, who considered that in the absence of a unified European bourgeoisie and because of the competition between European capitals, there was no place for a "the nucleus of a real supranational state", François had understood "the fierce determination that drives the most enlightened spheres of the ruling classes to develop a 'political Europe'", "that is to say a class voluntarism, essential for the ruling classes who wanted to control "the explosiveness and all kinds of permanent contradictions that run through the continent." "The establishment of monetary union - he wrote - is the qualitative leap towards the first nucleus of a really supranational state".

At the same time as saying this, he called for opposition to the "Europeanist" ideology relayed by social democracy, to this idealization of a "democratic" Europe. He insisted that "the institutions of the European Union represent a clear break with the bourgeois parliamentary system that is still dominant in the national states", because the European elites seek to remove the "European institutions" from democratic and social pressure and prevent a transfer to the European level of the rights acquired and the impact of national "civil societies". The shocked reaction of members of the "institutions" last week when they learned that Alexis Tsipras had decided to submit their diktat to the vote of the Greek population, shows how much François was right, more than fifteen years ago, to denounce the "authoritarian dimension" of the European Union.

The Union, said Francis, is "not an already constituted national state" and "does not have the vocation to become one" because "it is fundamentally based on inter-governmentalism." But, he added immediately, "this inter-governmentalism goes far beyond superficial and occasional coordination; it takes a permanent form, very articulate and very thorough. From there, and in this framework, there is the creation of the beginnings of a state apparatus of a supranational character."

And he emphasized: "the Council of the Ministers of Finance and Economy is of course based on inter-governmentalism, but through the Treaties, it has acquired a strong autonomy compared to other council meetings of EU ministers and therefore vis-À-vis national governments." It represents "such a degree of 'European' articulation that it can block on its own initiative any social inclinations of a national government." The "negotiations" between the Greek government of Alexis Tsipras and the "institutions" have shown the correctness of

the analysis of François.

This fierce determination to understand the projects of the class enemy, of the political apparatuses of the bourgeoisie on a European level, was aimed at formulating strategic hypotheses in order to intellectually arm the European radical Left that François was trying to build. He had arrived at the conclusion that in the state of crisis and decay of the traditional workers' movement, the struggle against the neoliberal offensive would not go through a pan-European mobilization, prepared for and called by the majority trade-union movement, that is by the European Trade Union Confederation, which alone had the material means to do so, but which had decided not to use its potential.

"The optimal variant that remains - he said - is a major social movement (even defensive) in a member country of the EU, whose strength would be enough to inflict a defeat or indeed a retreat on a national government." That is what we have seen happening in Greece, with the electoral victory of Syriza, one of the organizations which, fifteen years ago, participated in the meetings of the European Anti-Capitalist Left, organized by François.

François expected a social crisis to break out and win a partial victory in one country. In such a case, he wrote, "there would be a need for a strategy of transition, which" would "pose the question of political power" at the relevant level, that is to say, of Europe."

And he explained that it was necessary to "have known how to prepare politically and programmatically to respond on two levels:

• On the national level, an alternative policy should take shape, reversing radically and visibly, "before the whole of Europe," the priorities in favour of the working class, women and youth, taking immediately a series of social measures in their favour and accompanying measures to protect this political experience. Essentially, it should respond to doubts as to the possibility of organizing such a break on a national level, in an open and Europeanized economy, faced with the hostility of the EU. With two main goals: to find support within the country and to address Europe, its peoples and its popular movements.

• At the EU level, such a government "breaking with the EU" should not leave the EU or denounce the treaties. The goal is to amplify the crisis of the EU by using to the maximum the time and space that the institutional rules of the treaties allow, to generate support and mobilization in Europe so as to unleash an overflowing pressure on other governments of the EU."

Since in such a case, "the governments (especially those of the key countries) would be less ready than ever to put the decision in the hands of the people, strengthening further the authoritarian character of the EU and of political life in the nation states" it will be necessary to put forward "a slogan of general propaganda, namely the convening of a democratic congress of the peoples of Europe. (...) Such an assembly, which can be likened to a Constituent Assembly (although the term can certainly create confusion, depending on the historical traditions of different countries), cannot be sovereign, because this would presuppose as having been acquired a degree of supranationality which has not been so acquired, and which it is necessary to define precisely. It would be necessary, in a second stage, to discuss and take decisions in each of the countries concerned (those who are today EU members and others who would like to be) in accordance with democratic procedures."

François is no longer here today to help us to work out an orientation for the struggle, in this crisis of the European Union that has begun in Greece. But he left us ideas that must be grasped. I have no doubt that today, had he been alive, he would have done everything to generalize the struggle of the Greek people, to broaden it out in the perspective of another Europe, to help develop the indispensable tactical and strategic responses. It is up to us to

continue his fight.

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[1] Sally Rousset, Pierre Rousset, ["The IIRE 1982-2007 – II- The first decade"](#).

[2] François Vercammen, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35189>">"Lénine et la question du parti – Remarques autour de «Que faire?»".

[3] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35189>">Ibid.

[4] François Vercammen, ["Face aux institutions de l'Union européenne – Eléments sur les aspects institutionnels-étatiques de l'UE"](#).