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Obituary

**A vibrant internationalist,
feminist and revolutionary
voice has fallen silent: Denise
Comanne (1949-2010)**

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On Friday 28 May 2010, in the late afternoon, Denise died suddenly following a heart attack in a Brussels street as she walked to the railway station to catch a train back to Liège after participating in a Forum on the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of Congo. During this activity in support of the Congolese people, she had again been outstanding for her impassioned speeches and infectious good humour.

A feminist actively involved in the local and international struggles against capitalism, racism and the patriarchal system, Denise Comanne created CADTM together with Eric Toussaint and other activists almost exactly 20 years ago. Denise's premature death leaves a huge void, but also leaves many who, having met and known her, have joined her battle against Third World Debt and all other forms of injustice and oppression.

A tireless revolutionary, political leader of the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League, the Belgian section of the Fourth International) for many years, and former trade union delegate of the FGTB (General Workers Federation of Belgium) in the city of Liège, Denise militated to her very last breath in the cause of social movements. During the 1980s she stood firm against police and legal repression in the combat of City of Liège workers against a series of structural adjustment plans designed to repay the public debt. She was held in police custody, her telephone was bugged and she was convicted of participating in strike action and street protest. This only strengthened her determination to fight for social justice and revolutionary change. For her, the combat of people in both North and South against the tyranny of creditors and the debt was one and the same.

Five days before she died, she had actively participated in the writing and adoption of an appeal entitled "Femmes d'Europe, soulevez-vous !" (Women of Europe, rise up) which declared, among other things: "We, the women of CADTM, demand the immediate suspension of payment of the Greek public debt! We demand that an audit of that debt be made now to determine the portion of illegitimate debts that must be purely and simply abolished! We demand a stop to arms expenditure and the investment of the amounts thus saved in socially useful expenses: social needs and the fight against discrimination and violence towards women. We call for a rebellion against the austerity imposed by the capitalists." Denise had enthusiastically accepted to stand as a candidate in the Belgian legislative elections of 13 June 2010 on the Front des Gauches list. Her public explanation for standing aptly illustrates her determination: "The injustice of the capitalist system is a source of constant indignation and revolt: indeed I have experienced its impact on my own life as a woman and as a worker. This is why I am an activist. I agreed to be a candidate on the 'Euros' Front des Gauches' list because at last after ever so many years of failed attempts we are moving towards a true unity of the radical Left." [Front des Gauches](#)

Denise was an internationalist in thought and in action: solidarity with the Polish workers in 1983, with the British miners during their long strike of 1984-1985, organisation and coordination of the voluntary work brigades in Nicaragua to support the Sandinista revolution between 1985 and 1989, solidarity activities with the Palestinian people, several missions in Africa (Benin, Togo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Tunisia, etc.), in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal) and in Latin America (Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, etc.) to consolidate the CADTM network and participate in the reinforcement of the World Social Forum, solidarity in Belgium with the "sans papiers" (illegal migrants; Denise was also a member of the CRACPE which opposes the detention centres), not forgetting her role in the CADTM magazine "Les Autres Voix de la Planète" of which she was editor from 2007 to 2009, and for which she wrote many vibrant editorials and articles. Denise also knew how vital it is to fight the battle of ideas and made a point of honour of manning the stands selling CADTM publications. When she was struck down on the afternoon of Friday 28 May, she was toting the suitcase on wheels in which she always carried CADTM books and magazines!

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Denise was a very active feminist and a member of the international network of the World March of Women. The day before she died, she finished an important contribution: "Pourquoi le CADTM est-il féministe ?" in which she developed an acute capacity for criticism and self-criticism of her own organisation. This document makes a significant contribution to the entire CADTM network which is active in 29 countries. Finally, as an activist in the global justice movement, Denise had participated in its creation and closely followed the activities of ATTAC in Belgium.

Since the announcement of her death, hundreds of people have sent messages of solidarity and sympathy from every corner of the earth. You can continue to send your messages to the following address: international@cadtm.org

For those of you who can be in Liège, Eric Toussaint, her companion, her family and those close to Denise will receive visits on Tuesday 1 and Wednesday 2 June, from 17h to 19h at the Centre Funéraire de Robermont, 1 rue des Coquelicots, 4040 Bressoux (Liège).

The funeral ceremony followed by the scattering of the ashes will be held at the same address on Thursday 3 June 2010 at 10 o'clock in the morning.

Those who wish to express their sympathy can also make a gift to the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM) on CADTM account no. 001-2318343-22, with the mention "In memory of Denise". For bank transfers from abroad: IBAN: BE06 0012 3183 4322 - SWIFT BIC : GEBA BE BB).

Why I am Standing for the Front des Gauches (Front of the Lefts) in the Belgian General Election on 13th June 2010

Denise Comanne

I was born in 1949, never married, never had children but I am very happy in love.

I studied Archaeology and Art History, and during those university years (1967-1972) I was involved in all the student protests of the time (May 69, 'new learning' structures ["enseignement rénové"], foreign students' registration fees, etc.). I became aware of the issue of legalizing abortion and more generally of Women's Liberation.

As employee of the City of Liège, I took an active part in the major strike movements that developed in the city in 1982-1983, 1985, 1987, and 1989. In this context I became Union delegate for the administration sector FGTB - CGSP - ALR) and a political activist in what was then called the Workers' Revolutionary League (Ligue Révolutionnaire des Travailleurs, LRT - former name of the LCR, Communist Revolutionary League, Belgian section of the Fourth International). I have thus been a member of this party since 1984.

In the 1990s I had the opportunity to work for the CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt www.cadtm.org) while still being an employee at the City of Liege, an arrangement that lasted until my retirement in 2009. The CADTM is an NGO that aims at educating for development and whose earnest conviction led to the creation of an international network. In this context I have travelled to Latin America (a continent I had discovered with my trade union's work brigade in Nicaragua), to Africa and to Asia. I am currently refreshing my knowledge of feminist issues considering that the financial, economic, social, and environmental crisis will have specific consequences on women's everyday lives.

The injustice of the capitalist system is a source of constant indignation and revolt: indeed I have experienced its impact on my own life as a woman and as a worker. This is why I am an activist. I agreed to be a candidate on the [Front des Gauches](#) list because at last after ever so many years of failed attempts we are moving towards a true unity of the radical Left.

This unity will have to materialize thanks to common work on common objectives in the long term (well-known tune: "ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat"...). Among the claims we put forward I particularly appreciate the "Revocability of elected representatives" if they do not do their "duty" and the limitation of their wages to those of a skilled worker. Countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia recently demonstrated that such a claim can be part of a Constitution. They showed us that genuine constituent processes relying on wide democratic participation make it possible to achieve essential social and political breakthroughs. In Belgium politicians give us daily evidence of their unfathomable ability to betray the people and offer them as a sacrifice on the altar of profitability. "Que se vayan todos" as they say in Latin America... Mandates must be revocable!

Translated by Christine Pagnouille

Denise : a vibrant voice among the other voices of the planet

This text was written by Eric Toussaint, her companion, on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday in 2009.

I met Denise in April - May 1983 at the beginning of a trade-union battle which, on that occasion, was to last about twelve weeks. For thousands of us, working men and women from the City of Liège, it was the start of a legendary struggle 17,500 municipal employees rebelled against the structural adjustment plan that the municipal "government" (composed of the Deputy Burgmaster's Council backed by the Town Council) had decided to impose on the local staff and population. The political alliance was of the "olive branch" type: Socialists (PS) + Ecologists (Ecolo) and "Social Christians" (or "PSC", now calling itself the "Centre Démocrate Humaniste"). According to their logic, the best way to repay Liège's billion-euro debt (44 billion Belgian francs in those days), was to privatise several locally-based public services, reduce the number of employees and impose salary-cuts on the remainder. Denise was then employed by the Town-Planning department and I was a teacher at the technical and professional school nicknamed "la Grosse Mécanique". We met in a whirlpool of struggles and consciousness-raising : a long-haul strike, strike pickets, street demonstrations, strike committee meetings of about twenty people (including Denise), regular trade union meetings with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people present, strong-arm protest actions during the meetings of the Town Council that were voting in the anti-social measures, seeking common ground for public service workers and industrial workers, discussions to take stock and consider perspectives several times a week at the Le Bosphore restaurant, the café known as A l'ombre de la Cathédrale or elsewhere. Did I say a whirlpool? No, rather a social and political tornado! It was a very intense period of our lives, because of the speed at which events were happening.

I had noticed and greatly appreciated (as I still do today) Denise for her tenacity, her combativeness, her eagerness to speak up in meetings (which is not easy and it was the first time for her), her rejection of injustice and refusal to give in to arbitrary commands, no matter from whom. As for her, she told me later that it was when I spoke at a meeting in the Steel Factory (Jemeppe Kessales' workshop) that she decided to try and take our burgeoning friendship further. I had spoken before a meeting of workers and a delegation of Liège municipal employees to explain the connections between their different struggles and place them in their political context. Before the end of the strike we had begun our love affair - it must have been in June 1983. Twenty-six years already!

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I'll spare you the details. Our relationship has always had a political and social dimension, and internationalism has played a great part. In 1983-1984, Denise joined me in my nth journey to Poland to bring aid to radical trade unionists; but more importantly we launched, together with other comrades, volunteer work brigades in revolutionary Nicaragua. The revolution had triumphed in that country in July 1979 and we took part in a vast movement of solidarity, playing a very active role. From 1984 till 1989, almost every year we collaborated in organising the brigades which went off to work alongside Nicaraguan peasants. We all chipped in and organised fund-raisers in Belgium to send material aid to the revolution, and every brigade-member spent their holidays doing three weeks of voluntary work with the peasants, being sure to pay their own fare. In the brigades that we helped organise, almost half were steel-workers, especially from Caterpillar and Cockerill (now Arcelor-Mittal). It was a wonderful experience that Denise and I are far from regretting. We took the opportunity to stay a few extra days in Central America and Cuba in support of other revolutionary processes. On one occasion, things nearly turned nasty for her and me, when we were arrested by Honduran soldiers on the border with Salvador. We were carrying documents for the Salvadorian guerrilla movement that a nun had given us the night before in the Salvadorian capital. In difficult moments, faced with danger, we stood firm. Denise has always been strong in such tense situations with the forces of repression.

During these journeys, Denise was never concerned about her comfort. We often made do with a bedstead with or without a mattress, a mat on the floor or just a few planks of wood. And if Denise tries to tell you that she doesn't speak Spanish, don't believe it! All the members of the brigades who were with her in the « 5ta Region » of Nicaragua in 1989 will tell you that she was in charge, and she had talks with the Nicaraguans daily. But she prefers to say that she doesn't speak Spanish. Only someone who lives with her on a daily basis would know the efforts she has to make to understand what people say. To her, because of her hearing problem, picking up and understanding everything that is said is a lifelong combat.

It would take too long to tell you more about these 26 years of action and struggle. But I can tell you that Denise has already had several lives. She was almost stopped in her tracks just after 11th November 2005, but finally she came out of that ordeal strong and raring to go. Her brush with mortality left her more convinced than ever that life should be lived to the full. And she is right. Life should be lived intensely.

Now, with retirement, she is starting a new life. And like many retirees, she will not be leaving the struggle. She will remain very active and still has an enormous contribution to make in the fields of both thought and action. Denise still has a lot to receive and a lot to give.

She is an active and creative force on our magazine *Les Autres Voix de la Planète*, for which she has successfully assumed complete responsibility for the last two years.

June 2009

Translated by Vicki Briault.