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Ernest Mandel

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Ernest Mandel was an internationalist and revolutionary activist who combined thought and action throughout his life. In intellectual terms, his extensive theoretical output, his many analyses of the economic and political situation and his numerous articles influenced a large generation of activists, students, researchers and leaders of trade union, social and political organizations, well beyond the Fourth International, which Mandel helped to lead. Mandel was a builder of organizations. He devoted as much energy to building the Fourth International and its national sections as he did to producing theoretical and political works. Mandel is among some twenty Marxist intellectuals of international stature of the second half of the 20th century, and one of the few to have been able to combine action with creative and innovative intellectual elaboration, thinking outside the box long before the expression was coined. What follows is my personal testimony.

Between 1971, when I was elected to the leadership of the Belgian section of the Fourth International, and at his death in 1995, I was in contact with [Ernest Mandel](#) (1923-1995). Contacts intensified from 1980 when I was invited to take part in the leadership of the Fourth International, known as the United Secretariat (USec), which met several times a year for 3 to 4 days, and the International Executive Committee (IEC), which met annually for 5 to 6 days. The collaboration intensified from 1988 when I became a member of the Bureau [1], a smaller body which prepared the meetings of the United Secretariat and met at least twice a month in Paris. I kept a close eye on contacts with social movements and revolutionaries in Central America, particularly in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and more widely in the region stretching from Mexico to Colombia. In the last years of Ernest Mandel's life, meetings became more frequent and we grew closer, particularly during the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 13th World Congress of the Fourth International in early 1991 and the preparation of the 14th World Congress in 1995, which took place a month before Ernest Mandel's death. In the meantime, we had carried out a mission to Nicaragua together in 1992.

I first met Ernest Mandel (1923-1995) in 1970 when I was 16. Shortly before I had decided to join the Fourth International (FI), after I had witnessed the help given by Belgian Trotskists – the Jeune garde socialiste (Young Socialist Guard) and the Parti Wallon des Travailleurs (the Walloon Workers' Party) – to strikes in Belgian coal mines, first in the province of Limburg (in the Flemish-speaking part of the country) then in the Liège area (in the French-speaking part). Before joining the FI, I was active in high-school struggles, solidarity movements with workers' strikes, protests against the Vietnam war, solidarity with the struggle of Afro-descendants for civic rights in the US and also in support of the Cuban revolution... Ernest Mandel was one of the leaders of the Belgian section of the FI (Fourth International), and of the FI at the international level. I did not know this when I decided to join. Considering the contribution of FI activists in 1968, its leading body had to be in Paris. It was pure intuition. I decided to hitchhike to Paris with a friend of my age in June 1970 to meet the FI. We spent the first night under the Pont Neuf. Then we endeavoured to meet the Communist League. We rang the bell at 95 rue Faubourg Saint Martin. The man who came to open the door was [Pierre Frank](#), who had been Trotsky's secretary, notably when the latter was in exile on the island of Prinkipo in Turkey in 1929; he welcomed us with great enthusiasm. Talking with him was quite enthralling. No doubt the fact that two young teenagers were coming forward to join the FI made him very happy. We did not know that Ernest Mandel was one of the key leaders and that if we wanted to meet the FI we could go and see him in Brussels.

Subsequently, I was able to witness first-hand that the leadership of the FI was collegial. Ernest Mandel never claimed to be its leader, unlike other organizations. I never saw him try to assert any kind of personal leadership. He never tried to take advantage of any priority or privilege. His influence was the result of his actions and his contribution to the analysis. Having been present with him at more than a hundred meetings between 1970 and 1995, I can say this without any doubt.

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

I saw Ernest Mandel for the first time in November 1970. He was one of the speakers at a major conference for Red Europe. The conference was convened by the organizations of the FI, which were at the time said to be "linked to the United Secretariat of the FI" because there are several branches of the FI or several international organizations claiming continuity with the Fourth International founded in 1938 with Leon Trotsky's participation. The FI, which I joined and Ernest Mandel led, was regarded as the "United Secretariat of the Fourth International," i.e. the result of the reunification of two major components of the FI: the majority of FI militants in Europe (led by the trio Ernest Mandel, Pierre Frank, and [Livio Maitan](#)) and the section in the United States, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), after they merged in 1963. [2] It was 1970, and the United Secretariat had convened a major two-day conference for Red Europe in Brussels. It was attended by over 3,000 young people from all over Europe, including France. Ernest Mandel, along with other speakers such as [Alain Krivine](#), [Tariq Ali](#), a Pakistani militant living in Great Britain, and Livio Maitan from Italy, gave very combative speeches, and, for someone like me who was 16, that gave me a lot of conviction and, at the same time, invigorated me.

I also got to know Ernest Mandel through his writings. As soon as I joined the FI in the summer of 1970 I began reading Mandel's work. I had previously read a number of his essays in the left-wing weekly *La Gauche*, which he had helped to found in 1956. What convinced me to join the FI was the high level of analysis as well as practice, for example the involvement of Belgian Trotskyists in the miners' strike and in the struggle against US intervention in Vietnam. I was convinced by the analysis developed in a text by Ernest Mandel entitled "The New Rise of World Revolution". The 9th World Congress of the Fourth International, convened in April 1969 in Italy, adopted this document. The text emphasized the dialectics of the world revolution's three components. It took into account what happened in 1968, specifically what happened in France, which had repercussions throughout Europe, but also in Czechoslovakia with the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Tet offensive on the night of 30-31 January 1968, when Vietnamese revolutionaries succeeded in provisionally taking Saigon, the capital of the South (foreshadowing the United States' total defeat in 1975). Mandel's text analysed the level of struggle and the balance of power in three sectors of the world revolution (the most industrialized capitalist countries, the Eastern Bloc countries and the Third World countries) and demonstrated how these three sectors were interconnected. May '68, 1968 and the events of 1969-1970 were obvious demonstrations of what was in the FI's foundational text and the type of intervention the FI desired.

The next important influence for me was reading [Marxist Economic Theory](#). I devoured the paperback edition at the end of 1970, during the school Christmas holidays. Shortly afterwards I avidly read another book by Ernest Mandel: [The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx](#), published by Monthly Review Press in 1971. This may seem early, but I had read the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels when I was 13, in 1967, and from that year on I began to read various books on revolutions, particularly the Chinese revolution, beginning with *Red Star over China* (published by the Left Book Club in 1937 and borrowed from my village library) in 1967 and *Red China Today: The Other Side of the River* by Edgar Snow in 1968. At the same time, I was reading K.S. Karol's 1966 book *China: the Other Communism*. In June-July 1971, after joining the Fourth International, I studied Leon Trotsky's [History of the Russian Revolution](#). This book left an indelible impression on me and convinced me of the author's extraordinary ability to analyse revolutionary processes.

In 1971, I became deeply involved in the new Belgian section of the FI. In June 1970, I had joined the Jeune garde socialiste or JGS (Young Socialist Guard), a youth organization run by FI members that had split from the Belgian Socialist Party at the end of 1964/beginning of 1965 when its leadership endorsed the repressive strengthening of the Belgian State. The JGS regarded itself as a revolutionary youth organization from 1968 to 1969. It had the status of a Fourth International sympathizing group. During youth revolts that began in 1968, the organization grew significantly, recruiting 150 to 200 young people in several Belgian towns. These were activists who were active in their communities, usually at college or, like myself, high school pupils, but also in working-class neighbourhoods. This movement was merging with the elder generation organized in the Confédération socialiste des Travailleurs (Socialist Confederation of Workers) in 1970. Ernest Mandel, of course, belonged to an earlier generation. He was 47 years old, having been born in 1923. Mandel wasn't old but to young people like me, who were 17, he was an elder and a representative of the older generation. This was a generation that had fought hard during the Nazi occupation

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

of Belgium from 1940 to 1945 and eventually got involved in a left-wing movement inside the Belgian Socialist Party and its youth organization. As a result, the JGS began a process of merging with the older members' organization, which had a substantial working-class implantation in workplaces, particularly in the steel industry in my hometown of Liège. At the end of 1970, I attended the last JGS conference in Ghent, which authorized the merger. The merger congress was held in Liège in May 1971, which was an important base for what was to become the new Belgian section of the FI. The Ligue révolutionnaire des travailleurs or LRT (Revolutionary Workers' League) arose from the merger of the JGS and the Confédération socialiste des travailleurs, which brought together three organizations: the Walloon Workers' Party in Wallonia, the Union de la Gauche Socialiste (Union of the Socialist Left) in Brussels, and the Revolutionaire Socialisten (Revolutionary Socialists) in Flanders, along with their newspaper *De Socialistische Stem* (later *Rood*). The merger congress was held in May 1971. Ernest Mandel was an active participant. International delegates included Alain Krivine of the Ligue Communiste (Communist League), the French branch of the Fourth International, and Livio Maitan, a member of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International and its Italian section, Revolutionary Communist Groups. We were an organization of around 350 (you could even say there were nearly 500, all told), with a strong presence among industrial workers and a good presence in Flemish, Brussels and French-speaking universities, as well as in secondary schools. I was elected to the Central Committee, of which I was the youngest member. I wasn't yet 17 at the time. I believe there were about 30 members in all. There were industrial workers who had first joined following the winter strike of 1960-1961. There were comrades who had joined the FI like Ernest Mandel before the Second World War and who had taken part in the Resistance: Emile Van Ceulen (1916-1987) a former leather worker who had joined the Trotskyist organization in 1933 (delegate in 1951 to the 3rd World Congress of the Fourth International, National Vice-President of the JGS after outvoting the pro-Atlanticist current at the 1954 Congress, official guest in China at the invitation of the Chinese Communist Party), René Gros Lambert, employee (co-founder of L'Action socialiste (Socialist Action) in 1935 with Paul-Henri Spaak, co-founder of L'Action socialiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Socialist Action) in 1936 with Walter Dauge and Léon Lesoil, arrested in 1940 and deported to the Vernet camp in France, delegate to the 2nd World Congress of the Fourth International in 1948, [Pierre Legrève](#) (1916-2004), a member of the Trotskyist organization since 1933, a teacher who had been elected deputy for the Union de la Gauche Socialiste (Union of the Socialist Left) from 1965 to 1968, very active in support of the Algerian revolution and in solidarity with political prisoners in Morocco. [3] There were industrial workers who played a key role in the steel industry in Liège and in the glass industry in Charleroi and Mons. There were also renowned intellectuals. Alongside Ernest Mandel, there was, for example, the lawyer [Nathan Weinstock](#), who in 1969 published a remarkable and courageous book entitled *Zionism: False Messiah*. And the Central Committee, which met two or three weeks after that congress, elected me to the Political Bureau. I mention this because it was in the Political Bureau that I first came into direct contact with Ernest Mandel and his companion, Gisela Scholz (1935-1982), a German comrade who played an important role in the Fourth International. Mandel was 48 years old in 1971; his companion was twelve years younger and a member of the German revolutionary left, a friend of [Rudi Dutschke](#) (1940-1979) [4], known as Red Rudi.

In this PB there were several young activists, compared to Mandel's generation. Among the leading figures of this younger generation were [François Vercammen](#), [Eric Corijn](#), Denis Horman and Jan Vankerkhoven. There were several women in their forties: the lawyer from Liège, Mathé Lambert, the journalist from Brussels, Doudou Neyens, and more. There was also the urologist Jacques Leemans. François Vercammen (1944-2015) and Eric Corijn (1947-) were around ten years my senior, and when you're 17 and up against someone who's 27, they're "old". Gisela, who was 36, was also "old" to me. Thus we had a Political Bureau and a Central Committee with three or four distinct political generations, and it was there that I met Ernest Mandel. Every Saturday, the Political Bureau met in Brussels. I admired not only his historical and political knowledge and his theoretical contribution with the book *Marxist Economic Theory*, also how he behaved as a member of the leading body of a rapidly evolving organization, confronted with the radicalization of whole sections of the population in the industrial working class, the public sector, and among young people, and with radical methods of action.

After May 68, the FI organizations knew how to defend themselves against police repression and hence could prepare for it. We had honed our self-defence skills. We were also willing to participate in activities against very visible emblems of imperialism at times, for example the United States and its abominable role in Vietnam. In 1970

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

Vietnam was under American bombs, napalm was widely used. We also took action against the symbols of Franco's dictatorship, the symbols of the Greek colonels' junta. I'm talking about 1970, 1971, so Franco's Spain was very present and there was a Spanish community, including a large number of Republicans or children of Republicans who had left Spain between 1936 and 1939, victims of Franco's regime. There was also a Greek community, particularly among the coal miners, who were opposed to the regime of the Greek colonels. At the end of the 1960s, in Argentina, a major guerrilla organization had joined the Fourth International: the [Revolutionary Workers' Party – People's Revolutionary Army \(PRT-ERP\)](#), initially known as the PRT Combatiente (Fighting PRT). It was a very strong organization that claimed to be a member of the Fourth International and to support Guevara and Castro, the Vietnamese revolutionaries and the Chinese revolution. The main leader of the PRT-ERP was [Mario Roberto Santucho](#) (1936-1976). He had been present in Paris in May 1968, when he became involved with the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), which later became the Communist League. In the last quarter of 1972, Mario Roberto Santucho had a long meeting with Ernest Mandel (at Mandel's home in Brussels), [Daniel Bensaïd](#) and [Hubert Krivine](#). [5] Santucho, who had escaped from Rawson prison in Patagonia four months earlier, was about to return to Argentina to resume command of the armed struggle. [6] During this meeting, the participants noted that there were major differences of opinion on how to wage the armed struggle and in October 1973, the PRT-ERP announced its separation from the Fourth International.

As an example of the kind of action I took part in, in April 1970, there was a large demonstration in Brussels to protest against the Vietnam War, NATO and nuclear weapons. I believe there were between 6,000 and 7,000 demonstrators, and the JGS, the Trotskyist youth organization, had decided to persuade some of the demonstrators to go beyond the official route of the demonstration, to invade the North railway station in Brussels and get as close to the NATO building as possible by walking on the railway tracks, in order to condemn its action. I wasn't yet 16 in April 1970, but I was already involved in JGS activities, notably after the organization's engagement in the coal miners' strike. In the Liège region, I lived in a coal-mining community. This breakaway group involved many hundred people, possibly even 1,000. We didn't make it all the way to the NATO building, but we were near, and as we exited the railway tracks, we were heavily set upon by repressive forces. I was violently clubbed by the gendarmerie while supporting another young man who had been hit on the forehead and was losing a lot of blood. I was then detained and taken to a police station. Finally, after being arrested and questioned for hours for taking part in an unauthorized demonstration, I was not charged since I was under the age of 16 at the time. It was not possible to prosecute a teenager under the age of 16 for this type of "offence" at the time. I evaded punishment despite the fact that the gendarmes falsely accused me of hitting and injuring one of their colleagues. It taught me how to deal with the police when I was questioned, and it taught me to take a straightforward approach: sign a statement indicating I had nothing to declare. This is critical when attempting to avoid prosecution. I mention this experience because, while reading Ernest Mandel's biography [7], I discovered that Gisela Scholz, who was 35 years old in April 1970, was one of the organizers of this runoff and the demonstration against the war in Vietnam, and that she was very pleased with our ability to organize such a difficult action, even though we didn't make it as far as the NATO office. Gisela Scholtz wrote to one of her colleagues at the time, reflecting on a similar action that had taken place a year before in Brussels:

The horses, the tanks, everything went into action at that point. We fought as hard as we could and are proud that only a few of us were hurt. At most, 40 people were slightly injured, with one badly injured (...) Two gendarmes shoved me over a car, but I was able to slow my descent.

[8]

An important story concerning my friendship with Ernest Mandel and the issues of repression and security. In September or October 1973, I was summoned to Brussels to the home of an old Fourth International activist to address concerns about the security of the Belgian section. The meeting was attended by Ernest Mandel and Hubert

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

Krivine. What was the reason? Mandel and Krivine inquired whether I was putting the organization at risk by consuming and selling narcotics. When I told them I wasn't, things proceeded extremely easily, with no hint of annoyance or tension.

How did Mandel and Krivine manage to summon me to a meeting in a secret location when they were preoccupied with critical issues like the leadership of the PRT-ERP in Argentina, the [June 1973 banning of the Ligue communiste \(Communist League\) in France](#), the expansion of the Fourth International and more? Here's how I explain it: I had been on the radar of the Belgian authorities from 1972. This was directly related to my role in the LRT's leadership. In February 1972, at the academic hall of the University of Liège, I presided over an LRT conference in which we gave the floor to an IRA (Irish Republican Army) representative, despite the decision of the Socialist Minister of Justice and Government, Alfons Vranckx, to prevent us from doing so. The LRT organized five meetings in the five major university towns, and each time the police were unable to apprehend the Irish comrade, who returned the next day in another town. There were over 500 persons in Liège. Despite a tremendous intervention by the police, who felt humiliated by a group of young people and were quite upset with us, especially myself, we managed to prevent them from arresting the Irish comrade. I was summoned to the Judicial Police in Liège in September 1972, just a few weeks after I had turned 18. The prosecutor who met with me threatened to charge me with raping a minor. It was an easy claim: I was dating a girl a few months my junior, and we were having sex. I could "automatically" be considered guilty of raping a minor as soon as I turned 18 because a juvenile could not consent. When I objected, the officer told me that the public prosecutor's office had asked him to summon me and open a rape case against me because I was a member of the LRT's political bureau and the [International Red Aid](#) management in Belgium, both of which were considered to be organizations that endangered state security. The officer stated that the rape charge would be withdrawn if I cooperated in supplying confidential information about these two organizations. When I declined to become an informant, he became enraged, threatened me, and claimed he would scratch me (sic!). The next day, the police showed up at my brother's house, then at my parents' house, and finally at the home of a journalist friend to scare us. I wrote about it in the paper *La Gauche* on 22 September 1972, on page 3. I filed a complaint for violation of privacy and was never summoned again by the Judicial Police. My lawyers made the mistake of not seeking monetary compensation, which allowed the public prosecutor's office to disregard my complaint. I became a leader and speaker for a very powerful high school movement towards the end of 1972-beginning of 1973. According to the police, 160,000 secondary school students went on strike and demonstrated across the country in protest against a plan to require them to do military service from the age of 18. A few months after Belgium, the same type of action sparked a massive protest movement in France (known as the anti-Debré law movement). The government and its National Defense Minister accused the LRT of corrupting high school pupils. Given my involvement in the movement alongside other LRT members, the police's motivation to give me trouble was heightened. In the spring of 1973, I was informed by an older friend who had nothing to do with the LRT that the authorities were attempting to get me arrested for selling drugs. This friend informed me that he worked as a police informant. He informed me that the police were attempting to persuade him to testify against me. He went on to say that during arrests, police presented my photo to young individuals caught using drugs and temporarily detained in order for them to accuse me of being a drug dealer. A member of the LRT happened to be a social worker who attended interrogations at the prison. When he saw my picture among those of drug dealers, he was certain that I was harming the organization and, possibly, that I was a dealer myself. He forwarded the information to the organization without informing me. This was what led to my having to report to Ernest Mandel and Hubert Krivine. I must say that Ernest and Hubert treated me very decently, considering the baseless accusations that were levelled against me. Later, the police, specifically the Brigade de Sécurité et de Recherche or BSR (Security and Research Brigade), made another attempt to turn me into an informant, offering me sensitive information about neo-Nazi groups in my region in exchange for information on the LRT and the Fourth International. They eventually gave up, but I remained in their sights. It would take too long to summarize the subsequent events.

Remember that the Socialist Minister of Justice, Alphons Vrankx, bore a grudge against the Trotskyists who were expelled from the Belgian Socialist Party in 1965, and that, during trips to the United States to strengthen security cooperation, he was convinced by the Nixon administration that there was a link to be made between extreme left-wing organizations and drug trafficking.

The book *Marxist Economic Theory*

It is important to understand that *Marxist Economic Theory* provides an alternative to the treatises of Marxist economics that predominated among “Marxist” or “Communist” thinkers of the day. These were the essays and text-books on Political Economics that came from the Soviet Union or were produced in Beijing: they were dogmatic and poorly thought through, in theory and method. Marxist Economic Theory, which originally came out in French in 1962-1963, followed a genetic approach, working through human history from the earliest known stages of humanity, trying to see how human relations evolved and how different societies constructed their economies in different parts of the world. It is clear to critical Marxists that there are not 5 or 6 stages through which societies have passed, from primitive communism to societies practising slavery, through feudalism to small-scale commercial production, leading to capitalism and finally socialism, even communism. This idea of stages that all societies pass through was foreign to Marx’s thought, perpetuated by Mandel. This is clear from Marx’s works from 1850-1860, in the [Grundrisse](#) and other writings, particularly his [correspondence with Vera Zasulich](#) in 1881. Ernest Mandel’s work scours meticulously the way that Marxism was practised until his time. Obviously, he was not alone but there were not many who adopted the same approach and because of this he had a powerful impact on a whole generation. That was the generation before mine, in the years 1963-1964 until 1968. I myself belong to the ‘68 generation, and we were fortunate enough to experience the huge mobilizations that brought revolution back onto the agenda. Our generation, like others before us, immersed ourselves in Marxism to try to understand the society we lived in, destroy capitalism and build a society free of all forms of oppression. To destroy capitalism, you needed to know exactly how it functioned; and to this end, Ernest Mandel was a powerful aid to many activists. His work, *Marxist Economic Theory*, contained in its fourth volume an analysis of societies in transition towards socialism. He tried to understand and explain the reality of “real socialism” and of societies like those of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, how a society in transition to socialism had degenerated into a bureaucratic dictatorship, though without any restoration of capitalism, despite all. In the third volume, Mandel succeeded in explaining what capitalist society was like in the years 1950-1960. This, then, was the society inherited from the economic boom that came in the aftermath of the Second World War, referred to in French as “les Trente Glorieuses” (the thirty glorious years). Mandel describes the characteristics and contradictions of post-war capitalist society to reveal that crises have always been a constant of capitalist society which needs to put capitalism behind it and adopt a revolutionary solution. For more information on Mandel’s book *Marxist Economic Theory* I recommend Chapter 5 of Jan Willem Stutje’s biography, [Ernest Mandel: a Rebel’s Dream Deferred](#).

When I first met Ernest Mandel in 1971, he was a leading member of the Belgian Revolutionary Workers’ League (Ligue Révolutionnaire des Travailleurs, referred to here by its French initials LRT). He was teaching at the Free University of Berlin where he travelled once a week to give lectures to 1000 students. [9] He had just finished his doctoral thesis that he wrote and defended in German. I well remember his enthusiasm when he announced this to us at an Executive Committee meeting of the LRT in summer 1971. The thesis gave rise to a book published in English under the title [Late Capitalism](#) in 1975. (The German edition, entitled [Spätkapitalismus](#), came out in 1972). Ernest Mandel was at the zenith of his intellectual powers. He had many contacts and worked tirelessly, as was plain to see. He was also professor of Politics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (the Flemish-speaking section of the Free University of Brussels). He worked many hours each day reading, writing and carrying out his militant activities.

Ernest Mandel’s influence over the trade-unions

His influence was felt throughout the realms of trade-unionism, the working class and student youth. Among the working class, especially in Belgium, he was well known since the 1950s as one of [André Renard](#)’s close collaborators. Renard was the main Belgian trade-union leader in the radical wing of trade-unionism where Socialist, Communist and Trotskyist activists were to be found. This was the Fédération générale du travail de Belgique or FGTB (General Labour Federation of Belgium) which had over a million members. Two conferences, in 1954 and in

1956, on the theme of Holdings and Economic Democracy introduced the idea of anticapitalist structural reform. [10] Mandel was one of the instigators. He wrote a great many documents for André Renard and was invited to give an enormous number of talks in factories, trade union sections, and to take part in trade union conferences. He had the gift of making apparently complicated issues simple and easy to understand. He was also good at showing his audience that they had to act to change the status quo; so he would often take examples such as how a union delegation could fight within a transnational corporation, what contacts could be made with workers in other sites of a factory, how to communicate, how to try to unite in carrying out actions. Self-governance and worker control were central elements in this fight. [11] For Ernest Mandel it was not merely a matter of explaining how Capitalism functions, but also of showing, through concrete examples and concrete struggles, how workers could become capable of controlling what the bosses did, especially by demanding to see the accounts, overseeing the number of working hours, imposing a reduction of working hours; and when having recourse to strike action, organizing the strike in such a way as to render it the most efficient to win concessions from the bosses as soon as possible. A strike can spread and enable workers to win significant rights; but it can also lead to a general strike or even an insurgency. Mandel therefore spoke at workers' assemblies on such topics. As well as this, he naturally ran training courses for anti-capitalist militants and revolutionary activists within the LRT and sections of the FI. He was a passionate communicator and an instructor of the highest level. I took numerous training courses under Mandel and they enabled me to become an instructor myself. Many activists will remember his teaching, the courses he gave on the German revolution, the Russian revolution, on what constitutes a general strike, and how to move from a general strike to an active strike with occupation, a general strike leading to the creation of organs of workers' power on the basis of the most progressive experiments of the May 1968 protests in France and Italy, and also the experience of Italian workers' councils in 1920-21, Hungarian councils in 1918-19 and of course the soviets of the Russian revolution, organs of people's power or organizations of workers and peasants in the Spanish revolution of 1936-1938/39. Mandel was thoroughly acquainted not only with the history of the emancipation struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries but with the long history of Humanity the world over. He had deep knowledge and understanding and the desire to communicate to the younger generation the best use that could be made of all this experience.

His writings on trade-unionism

Ernest Mandel was constantly attentive to ongoing struggles, whether in the workers' movement in his own country Belgium, in the rest of Europe more generally or throughout the rest of the world. He participated in them all. He produced an enormous quantity of articles in the weekly newspaper he had founded with other anti-capitalist militants to the left of the Socialist Party. This was *La Gauche* (The Left) that he had founded in 1956 with the support of the trade-unionist mentioned above, André Renard. Relations with Renard became increasingly tense as Renard began to adopt a moderate position. *La Gauche* also "had" a Flemish version (*Links*) in which he also played an important part. He wrote hundreds of articles, and also wrote in numerous other journals in other languages, newspapers, magazines, reviews read by unionists and academics. In Belgium he produced crucial reports for the trade union FGTB, on the structure of capitalism in Belgium, and how a series of large capitalist companies, especially holdings companies, controlled the Belgian economy.

There was one pamphlet he produced, about 60 pages long, that I consider of great significance. This was "*Le socialisme par l'action*" (Socialism through action) which was signed by André Renard and of which tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of copies were distributed. It was read by tens of thousands of union delegates in Belgium and had a strong influence on them in the second half of the 1950s. Let us recall that at that time, Belgium saw several big strikes. First of all, during the Second World War, there had been numerous factory strikes and resistance against the Nazi occupier in which a younger Ernest Mandel had taken part. (Indeed, he was arrested three times by the Nazi authorities and managed to escape twice). Then there was the general strike for the republic, calling for the king to abdicate, in 1950. There was also a major miners' strike in the 1950s calling for nationalization and a very large steel- and metal-workers' strike for a thirteenth month's salary. There was a general strike in the winter of 1960-61, with over a million workers out on strike, in a country with a population of ten million.

Mandel was in his element. His ties to the workers' movement became even closer. One of his priorities was to stimulate a push towards self-organization.

Mandel had lived through 30 years of activism in difficult conditions. However, in the second half of the 60s came the profound radicalization of youth and the working classes all over Europe; and in 1971, the founding of the new Belgian section of the FI, the LRT, strongly influential in factories, showed Ernest Mandel that his proposals were coming to fruition in the practice of workers' power in several large Belgian factories, in particular the Cockerill steelworks in Liège and the Glaverbel factory in Gilly, a glass plant in the Charleroi area.

Mandel and the youth movement

I have mentioned the influence Mandel had on the working class in Belgium from the years 1950-1960. This influence spread to other countries as militant workers and trade-union delegates and leaders heeded his proposals in France, Italy, Germany and Great Britain at that time, then later in Spain and Portugal. He also had an impact on radicalized students in Germany with the anti-capitalist and internationalist student movement, Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund or SDS (German Socialist Students Union). One of the leaders of this movement was Rudi Dutschke, with whom he had been in close contact since 1966-1967, i.e. before May '68. In 1966 Mandel married one of the leaders of the student movement, Gisela Scholz. And of course he had an impact on young French Trotskyists, such as the twins Alain and Hubert Krivine, Daniel Bensaïd, [Henri Weber](#), [Pierre Rousset](#), [Janette Habel](#), [Catherine Samary](#), [Josette Trat](#) and her twin sister Janine, who together founded the Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire or JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth movement), after being expelled from the Union des Étudiants Communistes or UEC (Union of Communist Students) in France. He had an impact in Belgium on radical student youth some of whom had joined or led the Jeunes Gardes Socialistes or JGS (Young Socialist Guards), that merged with the Confédération socialiste des travailleurs or CST (Socialist Confederation of Workers) to form the LRT in May 1971.

In 1971, as mentioned earlier, having just completed his doctorate at the Free University of Berlin, Mandel became a professor at the Free University of Brussels in the Flemish-speaking section known as the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. At the time I was based in Liège when, under pressure from the student movement and progressive Marxist lecturers, Mandel was invited to lecture on Marxist economics at the University of Liège, in 1972-73-74. This was when I had just enrolled as a student, along with other students of my generation. Among them I will name [Luc](#), one of the two [Dardenne brothers](#) who went on to become internationally acclaimed film-makers, winning the Palme d'Or award at Cannes twice, once for the film *Rosetta*. Luc Dardenne and I attended Ernest Mandel's classes together at the University of Liège.

Ernest Mandel in debate with other Marxist intellectuals in front of full lecture halls

If it is significant that Ernest Mandel's talks had a huge impact from 1967 to the end of the 1970s, the impression made by his writings over the same period was no less important. He debated with such great names in Marxist scholarship as [Perry Anderson](#), [Ernst Bloch](#), [Herbert Marcuse](#), [Roman Rosdolsky](#), [Lucien Goldman](#), [Robin Blackburn-<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin...>> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul_Sartre]. He argued with the great historians, economists and philosophers of the French Communist Party such as [Charles Bettelheim](#), [Jean Ellenstein](#), [Louis Althusser](#) in public debates. And when he took the floor in certain meetings where his presence had been previously announced, there would be 1,000, 2,000, 2,500 or 3,000 people in the audience throughout the entire period from 1967 to the late 1970s. This was true in Germany in 1967-68. And it became true again in

Germany, in a big way, in 1988-89, in debates with critical Communist leaders such as [Gregor Gysi](#) with 3,000 or 4,000 people in Berlin. In May '68, he spoke at an enormous meeting organized by the JCR on 9th May, the night of the barricades in Paris, with an audience of 2,500; in 1971, he took the floor at the commemoration of the centenary of the Commune of Paris, near the Père Lachaise cemetery, where there must have been between 15,000 and 20,000; meetings in Portugal just after the Carnation Revolution in 1974-75 with 2,000 to 2,500 in the audience; meetings in Spain at the fall of Francoism, again with 2,000 or 3,000 participants; a big European meeting of the FI, previously mentioned, in November 1970, at the Free University of Brussels with 3,500 participants.

Mandel was thus a highly regarded mass orator among the radicalized avant-garde, capable of addressing students and workers together. He expressed himself with great ease in German, French, English, Flemish/Dutch, and did not hesitate to give talks in Spanish in Spain and Latin America, in "Portuñol" (a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish) in Portugal, in Italian when in Italy. He combined exceptional powers of analysis with an impressive ability to convey in his public talks analysis, a message, energy, calling on each occasion for anti-capitalism, internationalism, and the project of emancipation and revolution.

The Fourth International

Ernest Mandel joined the FI at the age of 16, in 1939, just before the war. He joined the resistance from the beginning of the German occupation and was arrested three times by the Nazis. The second arrest occurred as he was handing out tracts to steel-workers in Liège, on 29 March 1944. He was arrested by the German Army, tried in St Leonard's prison in Liège and condemned to years of forced labour. He was "lucky" to be condemned by the German Army as a political resistant rather than by the Gestapo. Had he been condemned by the Gestapo, he would have been simply sent to an extermination camp or executed straightaway. Deported to Germany in early June 1944, he escaped from one of the first camps where he was imprisoned thanks to his ability to enlist the sympathy of two prison guards, one of whom was a former member of the Socialist Party and the other of the Communist Party. He was soon recaptured and transferred to various camps. In all, he was imprisoned successively in six camps in Nazi Germany. He was liberated in March 1945 by the US Army from the camp where he then was. The camps where he was interned are listed in the German Archives, and also cited in Jan Willem Stutje's biography. [\[12\]](#)

From the end of the Second World War, Ernest Mandel became a leader of the FI. He had taken part in the first clandestine European conference to relaunch the FI, during the occupation and before his second arrest. There had been a meeting of Belgian and French FI delegates in a farm at St Hubert in the Belgian Ardennes in February 1944. Then he participated in the revival of the FI after Liberation. This time, along with [Michel Pablo](#), he became one of the most important leaders of the FI. He was 23 years old at Liberation. His role as a leader of the FI during the years 1940-50 until the early 1960s was both very important and discreet. He was known as a Marxist economist from the publication of his book *Marxist Economic Theory*, he was a founder of the Belgian French-language weekly, *La Gauche*, he was a journalist on the Socialist daily, *le Peuple*, and he became a journalist on the Liège FGTB trade-union daily, *la Wallonie*. It was not until the end of the 1960s, having been expelled from the Belgian Socialist Party in the mid-60s and straight after May '68, that he appeared in public as a leader of the FI. This, and his role in the international students' and workers' revolutionary movement, immediately resulted in him being denied access to several countries by various governments. These included the French government which denied him access to French territory, the United States government, the Swiss, German and Australian governments. In the case of Germany, it was all the more scandalous as he had resisted Nazism and been decorated by the post-war German government for his participation in anti-Nazi resistance; yet he was denied access to German territory, despite holding a doctorate from Germany and despite the protests of German anti-Nazi intellectuals and of course the students' movement, which demanded the ban should be lifted. Indeed, I remember that Ernest Mandel asked me to speak out in Liège when the Socialist Chancellor Helmut Schmidt visited the University. He asked me to make a public protest against his banning from German territory. The bannings did not prevent him from crossing borders. Ernest Mandel travelled a great deal, and in particular, despite being banned from entering France, he crossed the

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

border on a regular basis. For example, I clearly remember, as will thousands of French demonstrators, his arrival at the Commemoration of the Commune of Paris, in May 1971, invited by the Ligue communiste (Communist League) and Lutte ouvrière (Workers' Struggle). We must have been easily ten or fifteen thousand demonstrators when Ernest Mandel arrived to speak on the back of a motorbike driven by Hubert Krivine. Occasionally he was arrested by the French authorities and returned to Belgium. On one occasion after having been sent back to Belgium upon his arrival at Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport, on the same day, a comrade from Brussels drove him back to Paris by a discreet route.

In the second part I will discuss Mandel, the Cuban revolution and Che Guevara.

Translated by Christine Pagnouille, Vicki Briault and Sushovan Dhar.

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[1] The FI Bureau between 1988 and 1991 consisted of Ernest Mandel, Livio Maitan, Claude Jacquin, Gilbert Achcar, Janette Habel, Daniel Bensaïd and myself. Penny Duggan attended all the meetings. Following the 13th World Congress at the beginning of 1991, the new bureau elected by the United Secretariat was composed by Gilbert Achcar, Janette Habel, Phil Hearse, Claude Jacquin, Livio Maitan, Ernest Mandel, Braulio Moro and myself. Penny Duggan attended all the meetings (see Livio Maitan, [Memoirs of a critical communist. Towards a history of the Fourth International](#), Resistance Books-IIRE-Merlin Press, London, 2019. 455 pages.)

[2] Also participating in the reunification were activists in Latin America such as the indigenous and peasant leader [Hugo Blanco](#) (1934-2023) in Peru, who at the time of the Congress had just been imprisoned in his country. There were also very militant activists in Bolivia. On the Reunification Congress of the Fourth International, see Livio Maitan, *Memoirs of a critical communist. Towards a history of the Fourth International*. See the magazine [Fourth International, October-December 1963](#) In French, see also the journal *Quatrième Internationale*, [Le Congrès de réunification de la Quatrième Internationale](#), Special issue 3rd quarter 1963, Paris, 72 pages.

[3] Because of his activities in support of the Algerian revolution, Pierre Le Grève was the target of an assassination attempt in 1960 by the La Main rouge (The Red Hand), an organization with direct ties to the French secret services.

[4] Rudi Dutschke debated with Ernest Mandel in front of huge assemblies in Germany on multiple occasions. In September 1968, after an assassination attempt, he spent a fortnight with Ernest Mandel and Gisela Scholz. See Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, Verso, 2009.

[5] Hubert Krivine is a longstanding Fourth Internationalist in France and the twin brother of Alain Krivine.

[6] These facts are reported in Jan Willem Stutje's [biography of Mandel](#).

[7] Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, Verso, 2009.

[8] Gisela Scholz to Ray, 13 March 1969, Ernest Mandel Archives, dossier 652 cited by Jan Willem Stutje.

[9] Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred* q.v.

[10] Regarding neocapitalist versus anticapitalist structural reform, see Ernest Mandel, [A Socialist Strategy for Western Europe](#), Institute for

A revolutionary and internationalist activist, both in thought and in action

Workers' Control, Pamphlet no. 10.

[11] Ernest Mandel: [Workers' Control and Workers'](#) (Spring 1973) and [Self-Management - Dangers and Possibilities](#) (Summer 1974).

[12] Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel...* note 142, chapter 2.