

Denise Comanne 1949-2010

Sunday 30 May 2010, by [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2010).

Denise Comanne died on Friday 28 May 2010. She had a heart attack in the street after taking part in actions of solidarity with people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her funerals which will take place the 3rd of June in Liege.

Below, a text sent by Eric Toussaint, her compagnon. It was written on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday in 2009. Later we shall add a text Denise wrote one week ago to argue her candidature on the list of the Front des gauches (Front of the Left) in the Belgian elections on 13th June 2010 (already available in French).

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

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!

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.

Eric Toussaint

June 2009

** Translated by Vicki Briault.*
