

May 11 1971

London

Dear Joe and Barry;

Manon and I came in from Brussels late yesterday fresh from the JCS conference in Ghent held over Saturday and Sunday. Fresh ??? It was a long conference, stretching about 3 hours past what they had planned into Sunday nite.

After the Lausanne experience and her Rome experience Manon was pleased with the freindly reception we got. As you know when we went to see Ernest and told him about Manon making a bit of a jaunt around Europe and her readiness to speak to branch meetings or at public meetings they might like to arrange and her com- etence as a Quebecois in French things were very quicky arranged with the Lausanne Switzerland comrades and with Livio in Rome.

Well nothing was arranged by Livio at Rome at all for Manon. Livio dropped do11 down to see her—passed a few freindly words and that was that. Manon felt she was quite coldly or at the best indifferently received. They didn't even offer to put her up, to show her the town at all. So she went off on her own. After a couple of d days in Rome she turned up in Brussels. The next day she decided to head out again but before doing so we decided she should phne the Lausanne comrades and see whatb and when they had arranged something. We found that despite Ernest's call they were not going to arrange anything. So Manon said she would be prepared to talk to a branch meeting or even just a few comrades. So they agreed that she should arrive in on an evening the next week. When she got there nothing had been arranged at all but she did manage to have a ~~friendly~~ discussion with several comrades at the headquarters. All in all she was quite disappointed with the whole experience and this was making the French proposition quite unattractive to her.

I am not so sure how it looks to her right now after our meeting with Alain at Ghent. He was very warm but when I asked him about the arrangements with Manon he expressed suprise—he said that he had no idea when she was coming,....But you know I very patiently told Sandor her exact schedule re France and her availability and desire to make a tour of the major French branches. A little uneasiness caused me to go through the whole thing with Vergeat a few days later when he was off to Paris. But on Saturday Alain did not know what her schedule was etc. So we told him. Manon is arriving in Paris for the Commune celebrations—so we will see what the score is. My impression is that this information just doesn't get through the labyrinth of their operations.

But the comrades in Ghent were quite friendly, attentive. As soon as we arrived a comrade who I had met in Turin came to us and told me that he had been assigned to help us in anyway possible. They wanted to give us the lodging and meal tickets which every11 one else was paying five bucks for but we thanked them very much but insisted that we should pay our expenses. We stayed with the out of town comrades—about 100 at a youth hostel and eat with them at a special arrangement they had made—we took bedrolls Eric and Emile on several occasions asked if everything was ok—our aid made sure we got copies of documents that they had run out of—and all in all the situation was a very comradely one. The comrade who came over from Belgium for the YS-YSA conventions said that they would like one of us to say a few words to the congress at the opening of the Sunday afternoon session. Manon gave a good short address which was followed att entively and well received. A couple of comrades approached us at the end of the sessions and insisted in driving us back to Brussels and right up to the apartment. We t ok them into the local pub for beer and sandwiches and had a good discussion on many matters. Manon gave the some copies of our Quebec paper and copies of our resolution on the womens liberat on struggle adopted at the last congress(French version) They were happy to put them on the literature stand which was a fiarly good one—giving a good play of

But bang-off, the tendency objected that there was not going to be an election of a new leadership. Of course the incumbents had a very good argument—we are only two weeks away from the fusion which will elect a new leadership. All I can gather since the comrades gathering at this Ghent conference will be the majority of the delegates at the fusion that their real purpose was to start here and now the leadership struggle. Of course the conference accepted the proposition of no election. The tendency ended up on their hardest position with seven votes,—with a member of the IEC Charlier quite a sophisticated guy one of its spokesmen.

Emile's report projected more of the same thing— a general ouvriest line. I think I told you that at Turin it struck me that this was the general line of both the Belgian and Swiss groups. It is a line of students-to-the workers, students standing outside plant gates distributing leaflets telling the workers inside what the tasks of the class struggle in this and that shop actually are. We don't have the impression that this ouvriestism is carried in Belgium in quite as a hysterical way as in Switzerland. They are conducting student-youth work but it isn't treated with any real concept of that the student-youth milieu as an arena of mass action, that can project broad objectives of its own. It is treated only as another area of recruitment to the party. They also project the idea that they are no longer a propaganda group but are now a combat operation, capable of playing a leading role on the broad plane of the class struggle in Belgium.

The tendency in a somewhat confused way gives the impression that it more sensitive to the student struggles. The tendency also tends to scoff at the majorities pretensions that they are leading a combat operation. There was some laughter when the leadership talked of their implantation of forces in the factories.

The JGS hasn't been functioning as a youth group for sometime in all probability. With the fusion there will no longer be a JGS but only one Trotskyist face. The name that the organization will assume is generally conceded to be Ligue Révolutionnaire des Travailleurs. There was some objection raised to this name—that it was ouvriest and the name Ligue Socialiste Révolutionnaire was projected for adoption. The leadership recommended that this be left aside for the fusion congress to discuss and decide.

Krivine gave the international report. It was generally of a broad public character. In fact they had arranged for the press to be there and to carry an appearance that the conference was a delegated one. The press unfortunately didn't appear. Krivine dealt with LA only in passing—saying that the revolutionary army in Argentina was applying the line of the last world congress. He spent a little time talking about the operational and structural problems of the movement—the weakness of our cadres and the need to develop them, the lack of organizational know-how, the lack of professionalism and the need to allocate resources to develop a professional staff etc.

The congress started off with alternate translations—French to Flemish or vice versa. The overwhelming majority of the national committee comrades spoke Flemish, although they were also acquainted with French—sometimes they corrected the translators. At one point the translating forces broke down from exhaustion—with Emile saying that he would make a Flemish translation on the way back in the car. So for a short period to our surprise there was no Flemish translation. Krivine must have overheard my or Manon's comments. He told Manon that it was really a matter of little concern—the translating from French to Flemish was really just a sort of courtesy—as he said all the Flemish comrades knew French—understood it. However suddenly there was a rukus from 7 or 8 comrades—and they picked up the translating again.

There is a really national question. Manon and I were not sure where the hostel was and so we asked some workers coming out of a pub where it was—first in French and then in English—they protested that they didn't know either but were Flemish in the same way I have heard some Quebecois protest their francophonie

This congress is a sort of windup operation for the JGS. Over the May 30-31 weekend the JGS will be fuzing with the Belgian section. My impression is that the JGS is actually taking over the section. The major report was a balance sheet of the past couple years of experience. There was no political documentation—that will come I would suppose for the coming weekend. So it was what might be called "low level."

My overall impression was generally favorable. There was a small scattering of high school youth ~~but~~ the bulk of them were older young people. I would say in their late 20's—university students—possibly many of them doing post graduate work, some of them professionals, school teachers etc, a couple of younger workers. There were quite a few women comrades who are obviously leading activists. A tendency appeared at the conference and their reporter was a woman. One of them gave a report of women's liberation work which she is involved in—I gather the group is some kind of extension of the Dutch Dole main movement

The congress was held in a university hall. It was hard to make an accurate count of those attending. It was of course a membership conference, not a delegate conference of the all-Belgian JGS which one of the comrades said has a membership of about 200. The number of delegates voting on a key resolution was 123. I think there might have been another 25 persons there—there were a couple of comrades from Holland. The congress was well organized. The chair ran the meeting efficiently, the discussion was generally orderly, the sessions came off on time. They brought a mimeograph and typewriter to the meeting and managed to get the amendments to the documents and other material out to the delegates in time for the sessions as they proceeded. One of the comrades attributed the difference between the membership and the attendance to the exams, financial drainers confronting the comrades what with the Commune celebrations coming and then the Belgian section congress.

The leading comrades, the chief spokesmen for the executive were obviously Eric Corojin, Emile Vancoulin and that comrade who came over for the YSA-YS congress. Charlier also played a prominent role in the sessions but as a supporter of the tendency neither Ernest nor Gisela put in a show although Ghent is very close to Brussels.

Emile lead off the congress with the balance sheet report of the past period of work. He was followed by a spokeswoman for this tendency designated by the title of a document that has been circulating for only about 10 days before the congress. On allons-nous. Later in the sessions this tendency which was recognized de facto announced that it was a tendency—but the chairman declared that the national leadership did not recognize it as such—this went unchallenged—possibly just lost in the voting confusion as they commenced to go overtime. This tendency is composed of about 7 apparently leading comrades among them Charlier

I think that Manon and I have to say that we really cannot define this tendency politically. Kanon has since been able to study their document and still is not really able to define it in a satisfactory way. It opened up with a fairly sharp attack on the operating record of the leadership—for lack of exchange of experiences, lack of exchange of information, general bureaucratic mismanagement. From the response I would gather there is considerable dissatisfaction throughout the JGS with this leadership. However my impression is that the leadership has been working towards transforming the group with its centrist origins into something like a Bolshevik operation.

Among the amendments that this tendency presented to the congress is one that the leadership of the 4th international should intervene and provide one comrade with organizational and political capacities of an obvious character to be placed on a temporary basis in the national leadership, a comrade who wouldn't be mixed up in the debate, this comrade should play a role of a stabilizing influence, a unifying influence who would facilitate our fusion with the 4th international—literal translation.

Yet it appears clear that the Belgian movement has not developed a clear position on this whole matter—at least we have been unable to obtain any material prepared by them. We had a discussion with the two comrades who took us home and the one comrade who had been in the movement ten years expressed great concern about the matter but could not tell us of any important material that we could obtain—only a book by Renard and a really old one—a debate between Vandevelde-De Man. We will be speaking to Weinstock about this. Somewhere back I sent him all our discussions on Quebec

A few incidental observations; There is considerable concern and confusion about the significance and character of the general strike in Belgium in 1961—whether it was a pre-revolutionary situation etc. It appears that this has not been established in the movement. Emile in his report characterized the entrism experience in Belgium as having been a catastrophe. While we were unable to make a satisfactory characterization of the tendency nonetheless Emile in his summary hotted up the situation against the tendency. They have to be defeated, he said, They have a coherent line he protested. But unfortunately he did not sketch out their line. I told Emile that I would like to have a talk with him about the congress when I come back after the Commune, and he readily agreed. Incidentally at one point in the discussion Charlier stated that he had a sharp disagreement with Ben Said, about some aspect of the ideas that he expressed in his book Mai 1968—Repetition Generale and that this disagreement was expressed in an internal bulletin No 6. He also said that Ben Said has replied to him in a recent issue of Partisan (apparently one with some articles on Rosa Luxembourg. We might look this up. I intend to phone Charlie and see if we can get together upon my return. He struck me as extremely uneasy during the congress and while I made some gestures his way he never responded.

I will be going to Paris on Saturday for the Commune celebrations. Connie and Al will be busy and will stay here for a tendency discussion which of course is quite important—there is also an IMG NC meeting. I will take over the Pathfinder material and put on a big display so we can take orders. Manon will be speaking in Brussels at rue d'Espagne on Thursday and will join me in Paris with another Canadian comrade who is arriving here in London tomorrow. So we will have a three person operation anyway whether anyone comes over from your area or not. I intend to take the Pangs down to the meeting on the Saturday night.

I can read the copy of Joe's reply to Livioets before giving it to Manon—I see there is another copy in the works for me. When here in London Connie and Al showed me Joe's report to the SWP plenum which I never received a copy of—strikes me as even more important since it sketches our general strategy attitude to the majority and our feeling about the overall situation in the Fourth. You should bring me over a copy of that Joe.

comradely

Ross

If you can make a good buy on a cassette recorder Joe I would appreciate it. English prices are higher than Belgium. Don't go to a lot of trouble. Possibly there is some expert comrade who would be pleased to pick it up—and they are light to carry.