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How Engels Failed Italy

The Lead Up to the Hague Conference

JudgeSabo

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This is not the place for a revolutionary program, already elaborated and published long ago elsewhere in other books; I confine myself to conclude, replying with the words taken from the lips of a worker and placed in epigraph to this volume: “The worker has made everything; and the worker can destroy everything, because he can rebuild everything.”

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spontaneously by the development of capitalist exploitation. After all, I agree with you (if I interpreted your preface well) that it isn't necessary to overload those who you wish to educate. Nothing will prevent you from returning, at the opportune time, to the charge of bringing out this materialist basis of *Capital*.

Renewing my thanks, I am most devoted to you,
Karl Marx

I find some degree of hope in this exchange. I will end with Cafiero's conclusion to his summary as a reminder of what, beyond mere personalities, is really being fought for:

The revolution, the material obstacles that oppose it shot down, and left free in its path, will by itself be enough to create the most perfect balance, order, peace, and the most complete happiness between people, because people, in their free development, will not proceed in the manner of wild animals but in the manner of human beings, eminently reasonable and civil, who understand that no person can be truly free and happy if they are not within the common liberty and happiness of all of humanity. No more rights without duties, no more duties without right. Therefore no more struggle for existence between people, but struggle for existence of all people with nature, by appropriating from the great sum of natural forces for the benefit of all of humanity.

The disease known, it is easy to know the remedy: revolution for the revolution.

But how will the workers be able to restore the course of the revolution?

manuscript to your examination beforehand. But in fear of seeing a favorable opinion escape me, I hurried to allow the publication proposed to me. And it is only now that I was able to address you in the hopes that you may say if I was able to comprehend and express your exact concept.

I pray, sir, that you appreciate the expressions of my deepest respect and that you put your trust in me.

Most devotedly,
Carlo Cafiero

Marx responded to Cafiero as well, with plenty of high praise of his own:

Dear Citizen,

The sincerest of thanks for the two copies of your work! At the same time I received two similar works, one written in Serbian, the other in English (published in the United States), but they both are faulty, wanting to give a succinct and popular summary of *Capital* and clinging, at the same time, too pedantically to the scientific form of discussion. In this way, they seem to me to miss more or less their principle purpose: that of moving the public for whom the summaries are intended.

And here is the great superiority of your work.

As far as the conception of things, I believe I'm not deceiving myself in attributing a gap to the considerations espoused in your preface, and that is the proof that the material conditions necessary to the emancipation of the proletariat are generated

Introduction

While writing my in-depth critique of Engels' "On Authority," which can be read here, I had originally intended to include a section dedicated to the history of Marx and Engels' relationship with anarchism. This would have helped to give greater context for the essay by tracing the history of their misconceptions about anarchism, how certain arguments got shaped, and the interpersonal issues that helped to motivate the essay. Given that "On Authority" was originally published in Italy, I had especially focused on Engels' activities there.

But my critique was already quite long as it was, and adding more details about that history was minimally useful or would have required too much irrelevant background. It was becoming a massive portion of the essay, and only getting longer as I expanded or double-checked information, and as I wanted to release my paper in December on the 150th anniversary of "On Authority's" publication, time was running short.

Further, as I am not a historian, so much of my work was only finding ways to present the work of others, especially the fantastic and extremely detailed case provided by Wolfgang Eckhardt's *The First Socialist Schism*. I felt I was not contributing enough that was original, even as I supplemented it with commentary or points from Robert Graham's *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It* or Nunzio Pernicone's *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892*. To suddenly supplement work that was largely my own with material provided with work recounting the case made by another felt lazy in some ways or even moving too close to plagiarism (although I of course make sure to cite my sources extensively and credit them whenever I can).

Taken all together, I cut the section while leaving in my research about the publication history of the essay, and provided in small bits of details about the International Workingmen's Association (which I will also refer to as simply the IWA, In-

ternational, or First International) and the Hague Congress of 1872, or even putting in details in footnotes.

Because the information is interesting and still relevant for getting a sense of Engels' character in relation to Italy, I think it is still important to put out what I found separately from my critique. I will try to provide heavy footnotes for where I am pulling my information from, and in many of these cases only recreate the same presentation of the evidence found in these places. Eckhardt especially remains one of my main sources of information, and much of what I write here could be seen merely as an adaptation of their masterful research and following the structure of their own work, as my extensive quoting and citations of them should demonstrate.

Background of the International and the Alliance

To begin, it is important to have a basic understanding of what the First International was. Briefly, the International was, as the name implies, an international organization made up of various worker associations. Founded in 1864, it brought together various socialist ideologies and movements prominent at the time. It aimed to be a "big tent" organization of every organization that wanted to achieve the emancipation of the working classes, putting into practice the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!"

Everyone in the IWA was meant to be working together towards the same end, but could disagree radically about the most appropriate means for getting there. The role of the IWA was to bring these groups into communication with each other, so that workers may learn from each other what methods were most effective and offer each other support as appropriate.

This is stated fairly directly as the first rule from the IWA's General Rules:

The decision to not treat anarchism seriously, but rather condescendingly making it a matter of personalities, class origins, gossip, and counter-revolutionary conspiracy was exactly that: a decision. The reason texts like "On Authority" or *Fictitious Splits* do not seriously engage with anarchist theory or rely on the most basic errors of interpretation is because Marx and Engels didn't want to. It would be politically disadvantageous doing so, especially when doing so means taking seriously and discussing openly and honestly about the ways they had failed or subverted the workers. It is far easier to instead suppose that your critics are simply planning to do the same thing, but in reverse, and you have beaten them to the punch.

But one more thing is worth keeping in mind here. Despite Cafiero's serious and strong break with Marx and Engels and denunciation of the *Communist Manifesto*, he did not let this conflict prevent him from continuing to seriously engage with their theory. In 1879, years after the Hague Congress, Carlo Cafiero wrote a summary of Karl Marx's *Capital*, hoping to find a way to make its message accessible to the average worker, retaining the core of its message while reducing its massive length. He still recognized the great value in Marx's work while also being unafraid to break with and critique him.

Cafiero sent a copy of his summary to Marx, along with the following letter on July 27, 1879:

Most Esteemed Sir,

I'm sending with the same courier two copies of your work *Capital*, summarized briefly by me. I wanted to deliver them to you sooner, but only now was I able to obtain some copies by the benevolence of a friend, who with his intervention was able to affect the publication of the book.

In fact, if the publication could have been done at my expense, I would have desired to submit the

with the Italian workers unless they also happened to support the General Council's ambitions. This was done at the expense of actually trying to build the kind of network or advocate on behalf of the workers of Italy. Moreover, this was not merely a conflict of two different points of view, but brought continually by Marx and Engels into the realm of slander, trying to initiate this split over a personal dispute, in which they were far more guilty of every charge they brought against Bakunin and the anarchists. Pride and vanity played no small part in their actions, leading them to violate their duties by actively lying and spreading falsehoods about the state of the International to others and themselves.

Perhaps the most surprising lesson of this whole affair is the continued good relationship that endured between Engels and Cafiero. As ugly as the fight between Marx and Bakunin was, we have a glimpse with the relation between Engels and Cafiero at what a much better relationship could have looked like. When Engels encountered the work of Cafiero, which was already heavily influenced by his anarchistic surroundings before he started identifying this way, there was a real opportunity for a real working relationship.

This is best illustrated by when Engels confused Bakunin's work with Cafiero. When Mazzini denounced the Paris communards, Bakunin started to write a comprehensive response titled "To My Friends in Italy" on October 19th, 1871. It was sent in parts, and so loved by the Neapolitan IWA that they translated and printed it in a single night into a 15 page pamphlet in preparation for a non-IWA congress. Cafiero sent a copy to Engels, who without knowing it was from Bakunin described it as "an excellent production" that he "would undersign in all its parts." Cafiero, in credit to his honesty, wrote back "But it is Bakunin that you should congratulate, not me."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ The First Socialist Schism, p. 127

1. This Association is established to afford a central medium of communication and co-operation between workingmen's societies existing in different countries and aiming at the same end; viz., the protection, advancement, and complete emancipation of the working classes.

The rules also established certain measures for how this would be accomplished. Firstly, there would be an annual General Congress made up of delegates from each branch, passing resolutions to declare their common aims or take measures to keep the association functioning.

This Congress would also appoint a General Council, which would work to keep workers informed about what happened in other countries by a central bureau, as well as inform workers about challenges faced elsewhere, allow workers to act in a simultaneous and uniform manner, bringing proposals as needed, as well as facilitating communication with regular reports. Again, this is defined within the rules like this:

6. The General Council shall form an international agency between the different and local groups of the Association, so that the workingmen in one country be consistently informed of the movements of their class in every other country; that an inquiry into the social state of the different countries of Europe be made simultaneously, and under a common direction; that the questions of general interest mooted in one society be ventilated by all; and that when immediate practical steps should be needed — as, for instance, in case of international quarrels — the action of the associated societies be simultaneous and uniform. Whenever it seems opportune, the General Council shall take the initiative of proposals to be laid

before the different national or local societies.
To facilitate the communications, the General
Council shall publish periodical reports.

The original role of the General Council is an important point to keep in mind for later, as it would become a major point of conflict.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were members of this General Council, and much of their influence on the socialist movement can be credited to their positions there, helping to establish a “Marxist” movement. Likewise, revolutionary anarchism began as a movement within the International, and was especially found thanks to the work of the Russian exile Mikhail Bakunin and one of the organizations within the IWA: The Alliance of Socialist Democracy.

Marx had an odd relationship with Bakunin from the start. On July 6, 1848, Marx had publicly accused Bakunin of being a secret agent of Tsar Nicholas I in his paper, *The New Rheinische Zeitung*. This accusation was supposedly based on a report from the French novelist George Sand. Bakunin wrote to Sand regarding the slander, leading her to write Marx clarifying that she had no such evidence, forcing Marx to make a retraction.¹ Marx published her letter and added a comment that, by not verifying information with Sand before making public accusations that someone was an undercover agent, he had “only accomplished the duty of the public press, which has severely to watch public characters. And, at the same time, we gave to Mr. Bakunin an opportunity of silencing suspicions thrown upon him in certain Paris circles.”²

Briefly after the IWA was founded, Marx met Bakunin in person, their first meeting since 1848, and seemed to have a

Nothing of what is said therein is new to me. I know by now all the facts in all their worth. *Consummatum est!* [It is finished!], your work is complete! ... It is not I who says so, but the Belgian Congress with the proposal to reform our General Rules; and the Jura mountains and Spain repeat it: *Consummatum est!* And Italy? Italy will gladly welcome the news of the death of the General Council, which ... has given ... all the proofs of a *strong government*, replying, to whoever attacked its principles, with insinuation, slander, and the whole series of personal intrigues, which form the quintessence of the strong policy of a model State.

Italy will repeat sneering: *Consummatum est!*⁸³

Engels never responded.⁸⁴

Final Thoughts

I have cut off this history before the pivotal moment: the Hague Congress of 1872. Covering it would require a history, not of the International in Italy, but as a whole. For our purposes, it is enough to cut things off when Engels has unequivocally failed Italy beyond any hope of return. Coverage of the Hague Congress will likely require another paper.

From the above, it is especially obvious how and why Engels, and by extension Marxism, failed so badly in Italy. With Marx and Engels having declared war on Bakunin on very questionable grounds, and having ambitions to centralize power in themselves, there was little interest or effort to make contact

¹ James Guillaume, *Michael Bakunin: A Biographical Sketch*, Ch. 3

² *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 7, p. 315-316; Also see *We Do Not Fear Anarchy*, p. 35

⁸³ Combination of quotes from *The First Socialist Schism* p. 225 and *Italian Anarchism* p. 51

⁸⁴ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 226

you have allowed yourself to be persuaded to join the *Bakuninist secret society, the Alliance* which, preaching to the profane—behind the mask of autonomy, anarchy and anti-authoritarianism—the breaking up of the International’s organisation, practises towards its initiates an absolute authoritarianism, with the aim of taking over the leadership of the Association. It is a society which treats the working masses as a flock of sheep, led by a few initiates whom they follow blindly, and which imitates, within the International, the role of the Jesuits in the Catholic Church.

If my conjecture is correct, I must congratulate you on having permanently safeguarded your precious ‘autonomy’ by delivering it entirely into the hands of Pope Bakunin. But I cannot believe that you, an anarchist and anti-authoritarian of the first water, should have so far forsworn your dearest principles, still less that you could stoop to such depths towards myself, when I have always treated you with the greatest sincerity and trust. In short, you must clarify this matter, and without delay.

Greetings and emancipation.

Yours,

F.E.⁸²

Cafiero finally sent off his letter to Engels around June 19th, adding in a post-script with regard to the recently received *Fictitious Splits* where he openly calls for the death of the General Council:

⁸² Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 397-398

much more friendly relation. Marx wrote to Engels in November 1864:

Bakunin sends his regards. He left today for Italy where he is living (Florence). I saw him yesterday for the first time in 16 years. I must say I liked him very much, more so than previously. ... On the whole, he is one of the few people whom after 16 years I find to have moved forwards and not backwards.³

Marx therefore approved of Bakunin’s time in Italy, viewing him as an important ally in the area. This is rather shocking, considering where things end up. In April 1865, Marx wrote to Engels about using Bakunin in Italy as an opponent to the Italian republican nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, saying “I shall get Bakunin to lay some counter-mines for Mr Mazzini in Florence.” This positive impression seemed to last through 1867.⁴

Bakunin joined the International in June or July 1868 after it began gaining prominence.⁵ For a short while after he remained active in the bourgeois anti-war League of Peace and Freedom, trying to push it into a more radical direction, but his collectivist idea failed to win most of them over. When the IWA Congress in September 1868 appealed for League members to leave it for the International, Bakunin left the League entirely and brought several more members with him.⁶

These members decided they wanted to maintain their close relationship, and pledged to continue working with each other in a secret unofficial capacity towards their revolutionary goals. Beyond this, they also hoped to form a public

³ Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol 42, p. 18-19, quoted in *We Do Not Fear Anarchy*, p. 58

⁴ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 1-2, also see *Marx/Engels, Vol 42*, p. 140

⁵ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 2; *Michael Bakunin: A Biographical Sketch*, ch. 6

⁶ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 2

organization, which became the Alliance of Socialist Democracy, directly stating within their founding document that they intended this should become a part of the International.⁷

Marx once again began to view Bakunin as a conspirator, having set up this organization with the intent of bringing the IWA under “Russian leadership.” The Alliance was rejected from the International primarily on two grounds: (1) it was first established as an international organization, which seemed to make it actually a competitor of the International, and (2) the second article of their program mentioned the “equality of classes,” which Marx argued could be interpreted as meaning “harmony of capital and labor,” therefore contradicting the International’s goal of class abolition. Marx recognized this appeared to be a “slip of the pen” though, and Bakunin’s own writings confirm that he viewed equalizing the members of classes as the same as abolishing the class distinctions between them.⁸

The program was modified and the Alliance was broken up as an international organization, allowing its individual sections to be admitted. Marx himself moved to admit them on July 27, 1869, despite his remaining and growing suspicions against Bakunin.⁹

The Alliance still faced a difficult time after joining, especially due to more conservative elements within the International, because of its atheism, calls for collectivism, and revolutionary nature. This radicalism was seen as a threat to political candidates advanced by these elements, who therefore tried to distance themselves from the Alliance. For example, the Alliance in Geneva was excluded from the Romande Federation, despite the fact that they were official members of the IWA and

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4-6

⁹ Minutes of the General Council, 1868-1870, July 27 1869, p. 134-135; also see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 6

tries to prescribe to the workers of big industrial nations the road they should take for their emancipation.⁸⁰

This so-called backwardness of the Italian people became the orthodox explanation for the failure of Marxism in Italy and the success of anarchism. The true cause of this victory however had little to do with the level of industrialization, but on the behavior of Engels himself. Whereas Bakunin had spent years in Italy, working to build these relations and acting as the revolutionary champion of the International, combating figures like Mazzini, Engels did no such work and alienated himself from the Italian working class every step of the way.⁸¹

A few days later, on June 14th, Engels wrote the following letter to Cafiero:

No newspapers received from him since 16 May, although *The Eastern Post*, etc., sent regularly. How come? Might it be too much of a coincidence that at the same time (10 May) the *Bulletin jurassien* boasts of having in its possession private letters from me to friends in Italy ‘full of odious slanders’, etc., etc.? In any case, I have not written to anyone in Italy other than you, and it must be these letters of mine to you that Schwitzguébel’s paper is referring to. You owe me an explanation of that matter and I expect you to give it to me. I am amazed that you did not supply it as soon as this was published.

My letters have nothing to fear from publication, but it is a question of honour for you to inform me whether they were sent to my enemies with your consent or not. If it was done with your consent, I can only come to one conclusion: that

⁸⁰ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 393

⁸¹ *Italian Anarchism*, p. 53

Against Engels' claim that anarchists believed that the state was the source of capital, we have here a pretty clear assertion of the reverse. The London Conference is condemned not only for imposing its system on the International, but for endorsing the approach of conquering political power at all. It is recognized that the state and church as institutions are set up to protect capital, the root of privilege. Against the Marxist strategy of defeating these institutions by having "some counsel" take hold of it and "open to everyone the doors to capital," Cafiero instead endorses the revolutionary anarchist position of the working class collectively defeating it and taking possession of property for themselves. This letter would not be sent off until a few weeks later though.

Having established this alliance, Bakunin and the other anarchists now also had access to the various letters from Engels and all the slander and personal attacks. In particular, in a no longer surviving letter, Engels appears to have called for the need for a "very strong government" in Italy in order to "civilize" it, praising the work of King Victor Emanuel II in political centralization.⁷⁹

When Engels found his letters had been turned over, he quickly deduced that Cafiero had been the one to turn them over. His failure was now complete, his last ally having gone over to Bakunin. He complained about this in a letter to Cuno, giving one final excuse:

Cafiero in Naples and someone else in Turin whom I don't yet know turned letters of mine over to the Jurassians; that doesn't matter to me in itself, but the very fact of their perfidy is unpleasant. The Italians will still have to pass through a school of experience to realise that a peasant people as backward as they are merely makes itself ridiculous when it

⁷⁹ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 225

no part of the rules seemed to allow for their exclusion. Their application had instead been "indefinitely postponed."¹⁰

The view that the Alliance would "impose" atheism would become a repeated fear, especially as Bakunin and the Alliance were increasingly accused of wanting to take over the International. In reality, while they were explicitly atheist and of course wanted to persuade more people to adopt their position, they saw great value in keeping the International as a pluralist organization. If the IWA were to only admit atheists into their ranks, then this would defeat its central purpose of bringing all the workers of the world together and allowing them to communicate and collaborate. As Bakunin described it,

We think that the founders of the International were very wise to eliminate all political and religious questions from its program. To be sure, they lacked neither political views nor well defined anti-religious views. But they refrained from expressing those views in their program because their main purpose, before all else, was to unite the working masses of the civilized world in a common movement. Inevitably they had to seek a common basis, a set of elementary principles on which all workers should agree, regardless of their political and religious delusions, simply so that they might show themselves to be earnest workers, that is, harshly exploited and long-suffering.

Had they unfurled the flag of some political or anti-religious system, they hardly would have united the workers of Europe but instead would have divided them even more; for the priests, the governments, and even the reddest

¹⁰ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 9-12

bourgeois political parties, aided by the workers' ignorance, have disseminated a horde of false ideas among the working masses through their own self-interested and highly corrupting propaganda.¹¹

While facing this opposition in Geneva, Bakunin and the Alliance found more allies in the Jura mountain region of Switzerland. While the conservative opposition to the Alliance largely came from Genevan *fabrique*, luxury clockmakers and goldsmiths serving an elite clientele, the watchmakers of the Jura region served an international market and had already learned that there was little hope for change through their elected representatives, instead utilizing industrial action in the formation of labor unions.¹²

Engels and the International in Italy

The first official section of the International in Italy was founded in Naples in January, 1869. It quickly grew to 3,000 members in a year before being confronted with police suppression. Thanks to his earlier activism and disputes against Mazzini, Bakunin had an especially large presence in Italy, whereas Marx, Engels, and the General Council by comparison had essentially no contacts whatsoever. Engels wrote to Marx on February 11, 1870 that "Spain and Italy will have to be left to them [Bakunin and his fellows], of course, at least for the time being."¹³

This would begin to change once Marx and Engels were able to connect with a young Carlo Cafiero while he was traveling through Europe. Given the destruction of the previous

¹¹ *Basic Bakunin*, p. 98-99; quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 80

¹² *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 11, 13

¹³ Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol 43, p. 427, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 121

the London Conference was so wrong in wishing to proclaim an official system. The authors of the *German communist programme* tell us, on this point, that they will reach the goal through the *conquest of political power by the proletariat*; that is to say, through the constitution of a new state [...]. So then, my dear friend, permit me to speak frankly to you. The positive part of your *communist programme* is, as far as I am concerned, a gross, reactionary absurdity. I hold the state and, equally, the Church in horror, as institutions founded in privilege, created by people who wanted to ensure for themselves the exclusive enjoyment of *capital*. *Capital* is there, surrounded by the state, by the Church and by the whole *magna caterva* [great crowd] of the lesser institutions, that proceed from these principal ones, destined to ensure the privileged its exclusive enjoyment. We all want to win, or rather, claim *capital* for the commonality and two different ways are proposed to do this. – Some counsel a rapid strike against the principal stronghold – the state – whose fall into our hands will open to everyone the doors to *capital*; while others advise that all of us *together break down* every obstacle and *take possession collectively, effectively*, of that *capital* that we seek to ensure for ever as common property. I stand with the latter, my dear man, since thanks to your *Communist Manifesto* I have been fully able to understand the position. And you, good materialist that you are? How can you stand with the former?⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 224

Engels seemed to have no interest in using this “born intermediary” to intermediate though. Cafiero, the lone defender of the Council in Italy, continued to do his job even as Engels had given up. It turns out that it is exactly Cafiero’s good-will that caused him to be the one to give up Engels though. Palladino and a young Errico Malatesta invited Cafiero to meet Bakunin in person and make up for himself everything he had heard from Engels.⁷⁶

On May 16th, Cafiero was still acting in the Council’s defense. He met Bakunin on the 20th. On the 21st, Bakunin wrote in his diary “All day with Fanelli and Cafiero - alliance accomplished.” Cafiero also wrote “After just a few minutes of conversation we both realized that there was the most complete agreement on principles. Yet they were the same principles I had been propagating for a year in Italy, without knowing that they were different from yours.” He ended up staying with Bakunin for a month, and by June had fully become an anarchist.⁷⁷

On June 3rd he finished a letter to Engels, denouncing the General Council and the authoritarian communism of Marx and Engels. The *Communist Manifesto* especially was attacked along with Marx and Engels’ strategy for the conquest of political power.

Illuminated by the *Manifesto of the German Communist Party*, I now understand perfectly the whole import of resolution [no.] 9 of the London Conference [...]. Holding capital to be the source of all privilege, oppression, imposition, etc., etc., and agreeing on the need to return *capital* to the commonality, the question then arises on the way to effect this change [...]. This is the point where the various opinions, the various systems are determined; and this is the point on which

⁷⁶ The First Socialist Schism, p. 223

⁷⁷ The First Socialist Schism, p. 223-224 and *Italian Anarchism*, p. 50-51

section, Engels assigned him the task reorganizing the Italian International to the liking of the General Council. But the generally low popularity of the Council in Italy meant Cafiero had a rather cold reception. By the time he returned in the middle of 1871, the destroyed section had already been rebuilt, having regained several hundred members.¹⁴

To prepare him for Italy, Engels explained the ideological differences between himself and Bakunin in a letter to Cafiero in early July 1871:

Bakunin has a theory peculiar to himself, which is really a mixture of communism and Proudhonism; the fact that he wants to unite these two theories in one shows that he understands absolutely nothing about political economy. Among other phrases he has borrowed from Proudhon is the one about anarchy being the final state of society; he is nevertheless opposed to all political action by the working classes, on the grounds that it would be a recognition of the political state of things; also all political acts are in his opinion ‘authoritarian’. Just how he hopes that the present political oppression and the tyranny of capital will be broken, and how he intends to carry out his favourite idea on the abolition of inheritance without ‘acts of authority’, he does not explain.¹⁵

I had briefly covered Marx and Engels’ misunderstanding of abstentionism and the calls to abolish inheritance within *Read On Authority*.¹⁶ Engels had interpreted Bakunin’s call for abstention as a call for the workers to do nothing about present

¹⁴ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 121

¹⁵ Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol 44, p. 162, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 122-23

¹⁶ Especially see note 22 from *Read On Authority* for points on inheritance, since I am skipping details on the Basel Congress here.

political realities. In reality, Bakunin's call for abstention was a call to abstain from *bourgeois* politics, such as running candidates in state elections, preferring that workers instead form their own independent organizations to attack the state and capital from the outside, such as with labor unions or the International itself.

But even while critical of Bakunin, Engels surprisingly defends Bakunin's place in the International, emphasizing its pluralist structure and warning against letting any of these tendencies become 'sects.' Engels even maintains this pluralism is reflected in the structure of the General Council itself:

Now our Association has been founded to provide a central means of communication and joint activity for the working men's societies existing in different countries and aiming at the same end, viz., the protection, advancement and complete emancipation of the working classes (1st Rule of the Association). Since the particular theories of Bakunin and his friends come under this rule, there can be no objection to accepting them as members and allowing them to do what they can to propagate their ideas by every appropriate means. We have people of all sorts in our Association—communists, Proudhonists, unionists, commercial unionists, co-operators, Bakuninists, etc.—and even in our General Council we have men of widely differing opinions.

The moment the Association were to become a sect it would be finished. Our power lies in the liberality with which the first rule is interpreted, namely that all men who are admitted aim for the complete emancipation of the working classes.¹⁷

¹⁷ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 162-163; also see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 123-24

Marx therefore rejected the unity of means and ends proposed by the anarchists. For Marx, the only way to anarchy was through authoritarianism. Marx is also assuming that the criticism of the Sonvilier Circular is mainly a question about which idea would dominate in the IWA. A return to the pluralism which Resolution 9 had threatened would not be "to replace its organization with anarchy."⁷²

Instead of exculpating the Council as Engels had promised, *Fictitious Splits* only seemed to confirm people's worst fears. A text by either Cafiero or Pezza on July 20, 1872 put it this way:

The General Council sought to hide an important question of principles under a heap of gossip and personal hostility which it had no shame in recounting, presenting it to the international public as a document of great importance.⁷³

As you might expect from this, that it was even possible for Cafiero, the great defender of the Council, to write this involved a great change of heart. And we can actually see that play out.

While Engels seemed to have retained a positive impression of Cafiero for a good while, he thought little of his actual capabilities, especially in a country so thoroughly anarchistic. Engels wrote to Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, on March 11, 1872: "They are all Bakunists in Naples, and there is only one amongst them, Cafiero, who at least is *de bonne volonté* [good-willed], with him I correspond."⁷⁴ Engels also wrote to Paul's wife Laura on the same day that "Naples harbours the worst Bakuninists in the whole of Italy. Cafiero is a good chap, a born intermediary and, as such, naturally weak. If he doesn't improve soon, I shall give him up too."⁷⁵

⁷² See *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 206

⁷³ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 207

⁷⁴ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 337, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 223

⁷⁵ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p.338, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 223

opinions: “They had belonged to that party who had always preached abstention from politics”? Here, then, is revolutionary socialism in Europe in its entirety, transfigured by Marx into a hotbed of traitors!⁷⁰

Fictitious Splits does have a very surprising ending though, marking one of the few places Marx spoke positively of anarchy and “all socialists” as working toward it:

Anarchy, then, is the great war horse of their master Bakunin, who has taken nothing from the socialist systems except a set of slogans. All socialists see anarchy as the following program:

Once the aim of the proletarian movement — i.e., abolition of classes — is attained, the power of the state, which serves to keep the great majority of producers in bondage to a very small exploiter minority, disappears, and the functions of government become simple administrative functions.

The Alliance draws an entirely different picture.

It proclaims anarchy in proletarian ranks as the most infallible means of breaking the powerful concentration of social and political forces in the hands of the exploiters. Under this pretext, it asks the International, at a time when the Old World is seeking a way of crushing it, to replace its organization with anarchy.

The international police want nothing better for perpetuating the Thiers republic, while cloaking it in a royal mantle.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 206

⁷¹ Quoted in part in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 206

This lays out the same view of the function of the International I described above, and an explicit defense of maintaining the IWA as a pluralist organization, since this purpose would be completely undermined if it were to break into “sects,” a favorite term of Marx and Engels.

However, Engels lamented that Bakunin seemed to reject this pluralistic structure, instead wanting to impose upon everyone the program of the Alliance. If Cafiero was to be an effective agent of the General Council, he would need to be vigilant against these subversive “Bakuninists,” a label not actually used by the anarchists themselves.¹⁸

Unfortunately the Bakuninists, with the narrowness of mentality common to all sects, were not satisfied with this. In their view the General Council consisted of reactionaries, the programme of the Association was too vague. Atheism and materialism (which Bakunin himself learnt from us Germans) had to become compulsory, the abolition of inheritance and the state, etc., had to be part of our programme.¹⁹

Engels here is clearly playing into that same conservative fear that existed in Geneva against the Alliance. Engels is

¹⁸ I covered different terms anarchists called themselves in *Read On Authority* at the beginning of my line-by-line analysis. I will continue to use the term “anarchist” here regardless, even if somewhat anachronistic. “Bakuninism” on the other hand can be treated as a strictly Marxist term. As Bakunin himself would later write in October 1873 to the Jura Federation, “in spite of all the tricks of our enemies and the infamous slanders they have spread about me, your esteem, your friendship, and your confidence in me have never wavered. Nor have you allowed yourselves to be intimidated when they brazenly accused you of being ‘Bakuninists,’ hero-worshippers, mindless followers...” (Quoted by Zoe Baker in “Bakunin was a Racist”)

¹⁹ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 162-163; also see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 123-24

framing himself and the General Council as the great defenders of pluralism, reflected within even the council itself, while the “Bakuninists” were a “sect” that wanted to tear down this purpose. As we saw before, this view that Bakunin wanted to impose atheism was a complete fabrication. But neither did he want to impose the rest of his program. On the contrary, Bakunin believed that, given the great diversity of conditions the workers find themselves in, no universal system could be discovered. The IWA’s pluralism was therefore seen as a feature, and not a bug. As he put it:

It is the eternal honour of the first founders of the International and, we willingly admit, of comrade Karl Marx in particular, to have understood this, and to have sought and found, not in any economic or philosophical system, but in the universal consciousness of today’s proletariat, certain practical ideas resulting from their own historical traditions and everyday experience, which one shall find in the feelings or instincts if not always in the conscious thought of the workers of all countries in the civilised world, which constitute the true catechism of the modern proletariat.²⁰

²⁰ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 81. Bakunin’s praise for Marx here matches how Marx had publicly discussed the nature of the IWA. For example, in an interview with R. Landor in July 1871, Marx put things like this: “*But to talk of secret instruction from London, as of decrees in the matter of faith and morals from some centre of papal domination and intrigue, is wholly to misconceive the nature of the International. This would imply a centralized form of government for the International, whereas the real form is designedly that which gives the greatest play to local energy and independence. In fact, the International is not properly a government for the working class at all. It is a bond of union rather than a controlling force. [...] The Association does not dictate the form of political movements; it only requires a pledge as to their end. It is a network of affiliated societies spreading all over the world of labor. In each part of the world, some special aspect of the problem presents itself, and*

as evidence to be used by the Bonapartist or other prosecutors against members of the International.

It also contained some pretty blatant lies about the London Conference, such as claiming that the General Council had only a single delegate. In reality, 21 Council members were present, 6 with voting rights, and 6 more having made themselves the delegates of other nations. It made a very similar dismissal to the Circular’s view of a unity of means and ends, likewise claiming this was a religious view that believed “just as the medieval convents presented an image of celestial life, so the International must be the image of the New Jerusalem, whose ‘embryo’ the Alliance bears in its womb” and therefore “cast away all discipline and all arms.”⁶⁹

If Marx and Engels had taken the ideological split seriously, they might have elaborated much more on the idea of federalism and free association, or the ways in which they believed that authoritarianism was necessary for liberation. Instead, we have this hand-waving and the standard contrast of Bakunin’s “sectarian movement” was again contrasted to Marx’s “real movement.”

The final chapters got especially personal with no obvious relevance to the Sonvilier Circular, describing how two of Bakunin’s friends, Albert Richard and Gaspard Blanc, had broken with him and now declared allegiance to Napoleon III, much to the outrage of Bakunin and the Jura Federation. Marx wanted to present this as, somehow, the natural conclusion of abstentionism. These attacks did not impress Cafiero, who found it distasteful, writing to Engels:

And what about the Richard-Blanc affair? With what right does Marx, in relating that affair to the General Council, insinuate against all the individuals of a party, who do not share his

⁶⁹ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 205

5, 1872, near the end of their meeting. It was written in French, which most of the Council members did not understand, but Marx moved for the text to be approved anyway so it could be published with the Council's name attached. While Council members complained, it was approved nevertheless.⁶⁷

Even after being approved though, things were delayed. While the Sonvilier Circular fit on a double-sided piece of paper, Marx bragged that his response was as long as his book *The Civil War in France*. While I am sympathetic to long replies to short papers, obviously, they do not make for timely responses when people are demanding answers or voicing very real concerns. Technical difficulties delayed things even further though, much to Marx and Engels' annoyance. It would not actually be published until the end of May, 1872.⁶⁸

Marx and Engels had for a while now decided to dismiss any real serious ideological split forming, instead presenting the conflict with the anarchists as a personal issue, combatting the "sectarians" trying to sabotage the International and for Bakunin to set himself up as a dictator. Against the advice of others, the *Fictitious Splits* continued this on, largely focusing on Marx's earlier attacks against Bakunin, often relying on misinformation and rumor, or attacking their call for "equalization of the classes" and views on inheritance. It was filled with invective like this:

The Alliance, which considers the resurrection of the sects a great step forward, is in itself conclusive proof that their time is over: for if initially they contained elements of progress, the program of the Alliance, in the tow of a "Mohammed without the Koran" [Bakunin], is nothing but a heap of pompously worded ideas long since dead and capable only of frightening bourgeois idiots or serving

⁶⁷ The First Socialist Schism, p. 201-202

⁶⁸ The First Socialist Schism, p. 202-203

Cafiero came to the same conclusion on the ground about the "Bakuninists" of Italy:

I can assure you that he [Bakunin] has several friends here in Naples who share many of his principles and have a similar point of view as him, but to go so far as to say that he has a sect, a party that clashes with the principles of the Gen[eral] Coun[cil], that I can justifiably deny.

[...] No member of the International with whom I have spoken in Italy expects those principles of atheism, materialism, the abolition of hereditary rights, common property, and so on, to be written into articles of our society's pact; on the contrary, they would oppose this with all their strength; but on the other hand they are quite tenacious in wanting to lead all the members of their branch into sharing those ideas.²¹

Cafiero then, from actually speaking to the "Bakuninists," or more accurately the friends of Bakunin, came to accurately grasp the anarchist position. Rather than looking to impose a program upon the workers as Engels imagined, they instead saw themselves as an especially revolutionary force that would work through persuasion to bring the workers in a more radical direction. They intended the ideas they believed were best to spread, but not to set themselves up as an authority.

Engels responded with glee. He had interpreted Cafiero's letter indicating that there was no "sect" in Italy as a sign that Bakunin had little influence, rather than a sign that he had completely misunderstood the nature of Bakunin or the Alliance's position.

the workmen there address themselves to its consideration in their own way." (Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 81-82)

²¹ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 125; Also see Nunzio Pernicone's *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892*, p. 49

Thus in his reply to Cafiero on July 28, 1871, Engels used the fact that he was wrong in his previous letter as greater evidence of “Bakuninist” treachery:

We are pleased to hear that there is no sign of the Bakuninist sect over there. We had been led to believe the reverse because the Swiss Bakuninists *always asserted it to be the case*. They repeated it constantly and since we received no reply from Naples to our letters we believed it.²²

Engels doubles down on the sectarian nature of the “Bakuninists” by recounting the story of their admission, first being rejected since they had formed their own international organization, and then being admitted once they disbanded. Their acceptance is presented as tolerable because of this commitment to pluralism within the IWA, in conformity to their first rule.

However, Engels argues that this rule holds only with regard to *admissions*, and that the General Council can and will go far beyond this in its theoretical pronouncements.

I have given you these extensive quotations in order to prove the unfoundedness of any accusation that the General Council would be overstepping the limits of Article 1 of the Rules. In its official powers regarding the admission or refusal of divisions, it certainly cannot act in this way. But as regards discussions of theoretical points, the Council desires nothing more ardently than this. From discussions of this sort the Council hopes to arrive at a general theoretical programme acceptable to the European proletariat.

²² Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 180, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 125

The damned difficulty in Italy is simply getting into direct contact with the workers. These damned Bakuninist doctrinaire lawyers, doctors, etc., have penetrated everywhere and behave as if they were the hereditary representatives of the workers. Wherever we have been able to break through this line of skirmishers and get in touch with the masses themselves, everything is all right and soon mended, but it is almost impossible to do this anywhere due to a lack of addresses. That is why it would have been of great value for you to have remained in Milan...⁶⁶

Had Engels actually used the people and resources that were available to him like Cafiero, had he not been so quick to admonish or write letters filled with sarcasm and contempt, had he not been so focused on denouncing Bakunin and dragging the Italians they were largely unaware of, had he worked with the people he was actually in contact with as secretary instead of looking for the secret “real workers” hidden away, perhaps Engels could have actually built up the allies he is complaining he lacks here. But we might as well say “had the London Conference never happened,” or “had they not treated the General Council as a governing body,” or “had Marx and Engels adopted an entirely different approach to Bakunin and federalism.” Had they not been authoritarian!

Real Splits in the International

The Council’s response to the Circular was delayed again and again, with continual promises that it was almost ready. While the Circular had been published in mid-November 1871, Marx presented his critique to the General Council on March

⁶⁶ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 369

the newspapers of the Italian International, had represented the latter as unanimous in upholding the doctrine of complete abstention from political action, and in repelling the Conference resolution upon that subject. But it was not to be forgotten that both the correspondence and the newspapers, so far, had been in the hands, not of working men themselves, but of men of middle-class origin, lawyers, doctors, newspaper writers, etc. In fact, the great difficulty for the Council had been to open direct communications with the Italian working men themselves. This had now been done in one or two places, and now it was found that these working men, far from being enthusiastic for political abstention, were, on the contrary, very much pleased to hear that the General Council of the great mass of the International did not at all adhere to that doctrine. Thus it might be hoped that upon that question too the Italian working men would soon be found in harmony with those of the rest of Europe and the United States.⁶⁴

Engels wanted to present this version of events where it only seemed like he had completely failed in Italy because of these “middle-class” individuals in control of the press. The actual people there were in contact with could therefore be dismissed on these grounds. But if only they could get past this “great difficulty,” Engels was certain he could find the “real movement,” who would no doubt support his own views.⁶⁵

Things had not gotten any better for Engels by early May. Engels gives the same excuses again in another letter to Cuno, who was no longer in Italy:

⁶⁴ Minutes of the General Council, 1871-1872, p. 123-124

⁶⁵ Italian Anarchism, p. 51-52

Thus there was no problem in, say, the General Council openly advocating for the Communist system against a Proudhonist one. The pluralism within the International was therefore more of a bug than a feature, which would be solved thanks to the actions of the General Council moving things more towards this “general theoretical programme.”

Oddly, after just defending the pluralist attitude the Council takes towards admissions and condemning the Alliance’s supposed plan to impose atheism on the membership, Engels describes how religious organizations are secretly denied admission:

As for the religious question, we cannot speak about it officially, except when the priests provoke us, but you will detect the spirit of atheism in all our publications. Moreover, we do not admit any society which has the slightest hint of religious allusion in its statutes. Many wanted to apply, but they were all invariably rejected.²³

This was the state of things in July 1871. It is interesting that Engels would warn against the dangers of sectarianism and how attempts at imposing a program would lead to the destruction of the International Workingmen’s Association given the following events.

The London Conference and the Sonvilier Circular

On July 25, 1871, during a General Council meeting, Engels proposed that a private conference be held in September. This private conference to be held in London (where the General Council operated from) was effectively meant to replace the

²³ Marx/Engels, p. 184-85

actual General Congress which the IWA's rules established was meant to happen annually.²⁴ The Congress of 1870 had been suspended due to concerns regarding the Franco-Prussian War, and now the same thing was meant to happen a second year in a row. Technically, there was no provision in the rules to allow for a conference of this sort. Engels recognized that it as not entirely legitimate, describing it as "a compromise and was not provided for in the rules"²⁵ and would later describe it even as "an illegal mechanism, justified only by the gravity of the situation."²⁶

Because this was a private conference, it did not follow the normal rules of procedure for an official congress, such as the requirement to disclose to the different sections that it would take place or what it would be about. The actual sections of the IWA were largely kept in the dark about what the actual content of this private conference would be. For example, Marx and Engels both claimed that the conference would deal only with organizational issues rather than theoretical ones, but the actual content of the resolutions were only revealed during the conference itself and involved extremely important theoretical questions.²⁷

Marx argued that the General Council should be considered a "governing body, as distinct from its constituents."²⁸ In line with this view, the Council voted to give itself delegates at the conference with the right to speak and vote, even though they represented no section or nation within the International. They debated among themselves the exact number of delegates to give themselves, with Engels suggesting they should have an *unlimited* number of delegates with a right to vote. At the

²⁴ The First Socialist Schism, p. 75

²⁵ Minutes of the General Council, 1870-1871, p. 270, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 86

²⁶ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 296, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 86

²⁷ The First Socialist Schism, p. 85

²⁸ Minutes of the General Council, 1870-1871, p. 270

to his messages. But with no reply coming and increasing pressure, they began spreading the Sonvilier Circular themselves on January 30, 1872.⁶¹

By March 1872, Engels' campaign in Italy was going nowhere. One of his other few operatives, Vitale Regis, wrote to him to say the cause was entirely lost.⁶² But this is not what Engels reported to the General Council, telling them on March 5th:

Citizen Engels announced that he had just received a letter from Italy which he had not time to translate, but from what he could see of it it was of a very favourable character indeed; it proved that the teachings of the pretended leaders—doctors, lawyers, journalists, etc.—had not any influence upon the real working class; the doctrine that they ought to abstain from politics found no favour with them.⁶³

Engels was certain that the real working class, which apparently does not include doctors, lawyers, and journalists, was on their side. The regular denouncement of these categories of workers and the presentation of anarchists as "gang of de-classes, the refuse of the bourgeoisie" is rather shocking to hear from Marx and Engels, a journalist/private scholar and the son of a factory owner respectively.

Engels expanded on these alternative facts at their meeting the following week on March 12th, stating this:

Hitherto, all accounts received from the country, both by the correspondence of the Council and

⁶¹ The First Socialist Schism, p. 137-138

⁶² Italian Anarchism, p. 51-52

⁶³ Minutes of the General Council, 1871-1872, p. 117, cited in *Italian Anarchism*, p.

is in the hands of Bakunin's friends and adherents almost everywhere, and they are raising a terrific hubbub. But on closer examination it will most likely be found that they haven't much of a following, since in the final analysis the overwhelming mass of Italian workers are still Mazzinists and will remain so as long as the International is identified there with abstention from politics.

At any rate the situation in Italy is such that, for the present, the International there is dominated by Bakunist intrigues. Nor does the General Council think of complaining about this; the Italians have the right to make fools of themselves as much as they please, and the General Council will oppose this only in peaceable debates.⁵⁸

The "real movement" existing in Engels' mind was firmly in his corner. However, Engels quickly lost this new ally as he was arrested and deported back to Germany on February 28, 1872.⁵⁹

More and more places began demanding a new Congress and expressing their support for the Jura Federation. But while Engels had all but given up on Italy, Cafiero, once again, had to try and hold things together. However, more and more Cafiero has begun to adopt a more neutral position rather than directly defend the Council.⁶⁰

The Neapolitan section was one of the few places in Italy to not have joined the Jura's protest, and Cafiero could only follow Engels' lead in pleading for people to wait for an official reply from the Council while also pleading with Engels to reply

⁵⁸ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 309-310, cited in part in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 145

⁵⁹ Also see *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 145

⁶⁰ Italian Anarchism, p. 50

eve of the conference, the Council settled on giving itself six delegates with the power to vote, and nine non-voting delegates. On top of this, since some nations were not able to send delegates to the conference (some were not even informed it was taking place), Engels moved to make the Council's secretaries for each non-represented nation the delegate in their place. Since they were just appointing themselves to this position, there was no actual mandate from these nations on how the secretaries would have to vote either, effectively giving the Council six more votes.

This would be:

- Italy - Friedrich Engels
- Germany - Karl Marx
- Ireland - Joseph Patrick McDonnell
- United States - Johann Eccarius
- England - John Hales
- France - Eugène Dupont²⁹

The London Conference was therefore made up of 21 members of the General Council, 12 of which had the power to vote, and only 9 delegates actually sent by the respective countries with mandates from the workers. This would include six delegates from Belgium with mandates, one from Spain with a mandate, and two anti-Bakuninists from Switzerland.³⁰

Engels, a German who lived in England, had only been made secretary to Italy a little over a month prior on August 1, 1871. On this basis made himself the entire country's

²⁹ Technically, James Cohn, the secretary for Denmark, should have been a Danish delegate since they also lacked any, but he appears to have not attended the Congress. See *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 473.

³⁰ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 86-87

representative to vote on what he intended to be binding resolutions.³¹

Various resolutions were proposed during the conference, largely aimed at undermining or denouncing Bakunin and the Alliance, such as siding with the anti-Bakuninists in Geneva regarding issues that had come up with the Romande Federation, or launching (ultimately unsuccessful) investigations to prove Bakunin was responsible for certain issues going on in Russia.³²

But the most contentious was Resolution No. 9, which dealt with the demand that the workers form political parties with the aim of the conquest of political power. As Eckhardt summarized, there were essentially three positions being considered and debated at the time:

1. The conquest of political power through parliament.
2. Labor struggles and the rejection of participation in parliamentarianism.
3. The conquest of political power while rejecting parliamentarianism and labor struggles.³³

The first position was represented by Marx and Engels, the second by the anarchists, and the third by the Blanquists (who believed a small and centralized party organization could take over state power through an armed rebellion, rather than participating in parliament).

Obviously, this was an *extremely* important theoretical question, and the legitimacy of the resolution as originally proposed by the Blanquist Édouard Vaillant was immediately challenged, especially with the ability of a mere conference to determine this. The Council-dominated meeting however,

³¹ The First Socialist Schism, p. 132

³² The First Socialist Schism, p. 87-93

³³ The First Socialist Schism, p. 94-95

of reasoning is found throughout “On Authority” later, as I covered extensively in my critique.

Letters criticizing the Council continued to come in, with more sections following the Jura Federation’s lead in demanding a real Congress, to which Engels would respond with more sarcastic letters. Engels was becoming increasingly despondent and bitter, writing to Johann Becker on February 16, 1872:

These damned Italians make more work for me than the entire rest of the International put together makes for the General Council. And it is all the more infuriating as in all probability little will come of it as long as the Italian workers are content to allow a few doctrinaire journalists and lawyers to call the tune on their behalf.⁵⁶

Engels did however find one surprising ally in Theodore Cuno, a German SDAP member who fled to Italy from police repression. Now living in Milan, Cuno was startled by the uproar around the Sonvilier Circular and wrote to Engels to try and figure out what was going on.⁵⁷

Engels was all too happy to complain about Bakunin in his letter on January 24, and his response was covered in my critique of “On Authority” as it holds early versions of the arguments, repeating Engels’ mistakes about abstentionism and the anarchist theory of the state as having created capital. Engels also assures Cuno that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the workers of Italy were really on their side against Bakunin:

The Bakuninist press asserts that 20 Italian sections have affiliated with them; I have no knowledge of them. In any event, the leadership

⁵⁶ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 321, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 136

⁵⁷ The First Socialist Schism, p. 139

committee, or rather the statistical and correspondence bureau, must by no means keep them out, for this would amount to establishing a hierarchical and authoritarian organisation! And above all, there should be no disciplined sections! Indeed, no party discipline, no centralisation of forces at a particular point, no weapons of struggle! But what, then, would happen to the model of the future society? In short, where would this new organisation get us? To the cowardly, servile organisation of the early Christians, those slaves, who gratefully accepted every kick and whose grovelling did indeed after 300 years win them the victory of their religion—a method of revolution which the proletariat will surely not imitate! Like the early Christians, who took heaven as they imagined it as the model for their organisation, so we are to take Mr. Bakunin’s heaven of the future society as a model, and are to pray and hope instead of fighting. And the people who preach this nonsense pretend to be the only true revolutionaries!⁵⁵

This view cannot really be found in the Sonvilier Circular, but it follows from Engels’ assumptions about what was meant by the ideas of abstentionism, prefiguration, and the objections to the centralization of power in the General Council. Joint action is made impossible since there would be no executive committee to impose its will. Because we are aiming for a society that has abolished class conflict, we must therefore today act as if no conflicts exist and embrace complete pacifism, even in the face of abuse and attack, since any resistance to these acts of authority would themselves be authoritarian. This same line

⁵⁵ Marx/Engels, Vol 23, p. 66-67, quoted in part in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 116

filled with the misrepresentation of abstentionism I discussed in *Read On Authority*, ultimately passed a version of this resolution. It then tasked the General Council with finishing the exact wording, giving them full power to change it *even after the London Conference*. Two weeks later, the General Council created and adopted a revised version of the resolution. Then Marx changed the wording of this resolution *again, even after it had been adopted*.³⁴

The final version of the resolution can be seen here:

Considering, that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes;

That this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end — the abolition of classes;

That the combination of forces which the working class has already effected by its economical struggles ought at the same time to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of landlords and capitalists —

The Conference recalls to the members of the *International*:

That in the militant state of the working class, its economical movement and its political action are indissolubly united.

Thus Engels, who just a few months ago warned Cafiero of the evils of the “Bakuninist” sect who wished to impose polit-

³⁴ *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 93-100

ical abstentionism on the membership, had now helped to establish an anti-abstentionist orthodoxy upon the International.

The London Conference was soon after opposed by the Jura Federation (which formed thanks to the General Council's other questionable moves denying them membership into the Romande Federation). On November 12, 1871, they published a rebuke called the Sonvilier Circular, which I covered in part in *Read On Authority*.

Against Marx's view that the General Council needed to exist as a "governing body," the Circular argued that it was a "central bureau of correspondence":

When the International Worker's Association was created, a General Council was set up whose function, according to the statutes, was that of serving as Central Bureau of correspondence between the Sections, but which was not delegated any authority whatsoever, which would have been contrary to the very essence of the International, which is only an immense protest against authority.

This argument followed with an extensive citing of the general statutes and regulations of the IWA to make their case, as well as a history of how more power had been given to the Council, such through administrative resolutions at the Basel Congress of 1869 (which ironically, Bakunin and the Jura Federation had a hand in, much to their later regret),³⁵ including the power and right to suspend sections of the IWA and settle disputes between branches until the next Congress. This turned out to have given over far more power than expected, not only because it was used much more aggressively than anticipated, but because Congresses were simply no longer being held. This power, the Circular argued, had a corrupting effect:

³⁵ The First Socialist Schism, p. 146-149

achieve this through a system built upon free association and federation.⁵⁴

For Engels, this idea of a unity of means and ends was instead a rejection of the recognition that we do not live in a future society, therefore demanding complete non-action in the present, which is how he understood the call for "abstention." Because of this, he described a nightmarish scenario where the ideas of the Jura Federation were put into practice:

Let us try to imagine what our own German organisation would look like according to this pattern. Instead of fighting the government and the bourgeoisie, it would meditate on whether each paragraph of our General Rules and each resolution passed by the Congress presented a true image of the future society. In place of our executive committee there would be a simple statistical and correspondence bureau; it would have to deal as best it knew with the independent sections, which are so independent that they can accept no steering authority, be it even one set up by their own free decision; for they would thus violate their primary duty—that of being a true model of the future society. Co-ordination of forces and joint action are no longer mentioned. If in each individual section the minority submits to the decision of the majority, it commits a crime against the principles of freedom and accepts a principle which leads to authority and dictatorship! If Stieber and all his associates, if the entire black cabinet, if all Prussian officers were ordered to join the Social-Democratic organisation in order to wreck it, the

⁵⁴ For more on the theory of practice and the unity of means and ends, see Zoe Baker's *Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in Europe and the United States*, p. 117-130

of a future society in which there will be no executions à la Versailles, no courts-martial, no standing armies, no inspection of private correspondence, and no Brunswick criminal court! Just now, when we have to defend ourselves with all the means at our disposal, the proletariat is told to organise not in accordance with requirements of the struggle it is daily and hourly compelled to wage, but according to the vague notions of a future society entertained by some dreamers.

It is crucial that we understand Engels' interpretation of the unity between means and ends if we are going to understand the rest of his argument.

For the anarchists, this unity of means and ends represents the idea that, to achieve our aim of the emancipation of the working classes, our methods of practice and organizational forms, in other words the systems we produce and reproduce, will determine the sort of society we achieve. Thus, while the exact actions and purpose an organization serves may shift and develop over time due to changing circumstances, there would be no dramatic break in our form of organizing now and how we organize in a future society. For example, in his *Ideas of Social Organization*, the anarchist James Guillaume argued that labor unions which today unite the workers in defense of their wages and against the attacks of the employers, will continue to unite workers in socialism, but now for the purposes of production and education about their industries. This is a theory of social change rooted in a theory of practice, literally in the sense of how practicing something develops our drives and capacities to better implement and achieve it. To achieve the emancipation of the working classes, we must organize in a manner that rejects domination. The anarchist strategy is to

If there is one incontrovertible fact, borne out a thousand times by experience, it is that authority has a corrupting effect on those in whose hands it is placed. It is absolutely impossible for a man with power over his neighbours to remain a moral man.

This rise in power of the Council was responsible for their increasing view of themselves, not as a bureau of correspondence, but as a government who could enforce its own theoretical views, and sees all opposing tendencies as sects.

Having, in their own eyes, become a sort of government, it was natural that their own particular ideas should have come to appear to them as the official theory enjoying exclusive rights within the Association; whereas divergent ideas issuing from other groups struck them, not as the legitimate manifestation of an opinion every bit as tenable as their own, but rather out-and-out heresy.

The Circular recounted the ways in which the Council had gone beyond even this by replacing the General Congress with its own private conference, giving itself as many delegates as it pleased, and exercising authority against sections it disliked.

Since the Basel Congress in 1869, the General Congress of the Association has not been convened, and the General Council found itself left on its own during the last two years. The Franco-German war has been the reason for the absence of a Congress in 1870 and 1871. The Congress has been replaced by a secret Conference summoned by the General Council even if the Statutes did not give it this power. This secret Conference, that certainly didn't grant a full representation of the

International, as many Sections, ours included, were not informed; this Conference whose majority was manipulated from the start because the General Council had taken the licence of admitting six delegates elected by it with the right to vote; this Conference which absolutely could not pretend to be invested of the rights entitled to a Congress, has nevertheless taken some resolutions which gravely infringe the General Statutes and intends to transform the International, from a free Federation of autonomous Sections, to an hierarchical and authoritarian organization composed of disciplined Sections placed under the power of a General Council which can, at its own mercy, deny their admission or even suspend their activity. And, to crown all this, a decision taken at this Conference, establishes that the General Council will fix the date and the place of the next Congress or of the Conference which will replace it. In this way we are threatened with the suppression of the General Congresses, these large public conventions of the International, and their substitution with secret Conferences similar to the one just held in London.

This central issue of the principle of authority being introduced into their association was seen as the root cause of the issue. The Jura Federation denied the Council of having any “criminal intent,” but that this is rather the inevitable outcome of the power they had been given and their ideals of “the conquest of political power by the working class,” pushing to make the International more hierarchical.

The Circular therefore demanded that autonomy be restored to the sections of the International, that the Council be reverted to its original role, and that the International finds its

incidentally would not have been published until four and a half months later as *Fictitious Splits in the International*.⁵²

However, Engels did publish his *own* response on January 10, 1872 called “The Congress of Sonvilier and the International,” blaming the Jura Federation under Bakunin’s leadership for having thrown an “apple of discord” into the International. Engels found the Circular’s view of the General Council, in contrast to their view that it should exist as a governing body, and its advocacy for a “free federation of autonomous sections” to be bizarre.

To our German readers, who know only too well the value of an organisation that is able to defend itself, all this will seem very strange. And this is quite natural, for Mr. Bakunin’s theories, which appear here in their full splendour, have not yet penetrated into Germany. A workers’ association which has inscribed upon its banner the motto of struggle for the emancipation of the working class is to be headed, not by an executive committee, but merely by a statistical and correspondence bureau!⁵³

Thus for Engels’ conception, the emancipation of the working classes could not be achieved by the working classes themselves unless they were properly guided by an executive committee.

Engels flatly rejected the unity of means and ends. The proletariat’s fight for emancipation must be authoritarian in form.

We Germans have earned a bad name for our mysticism, but we have never gone the length of such mysticism. The International is to be the prototype

⁵² The First Socialist Schism, p. 134-135

⁵³ Marx/Engels, Vol 23, p. 66, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 115

Cafiero's comment on "clarifications" on resolution 9 is referring to Engels' previously noted deception, where it did not require the formation of a party and actually was more in line with abstentionism.

To make matters worse for Engels, Cafiero began to profess his commitment to "anarchism" as part of materialist rationalism. Engels' greatest ally in Italy was slipping through his fingers.

Meanwhile, protests continued to grow against the General Council. The Belgian federal congress was held around Christmas of 1871 and passed a number of resolutions with strikingly similar language to the Circular, even going further in calling for a revision of the rules themselves to prevent the kind of authoritarian organizing on display at the London Conference.⁵¹

Engels in Denial

Engels wasn't finding any new allies in Italy either. Despite Engels' proclamation that new members must recognize the London Conference, the Circular was making its way through Italy and was attracting widespread support.

For example, in October 1871 a new Workers Federation formed in Turin, but which sided with Mazzini against the International. Carlo Terzaghi sent a letter to the General Council to inform them about it, forming a separate organization with about 270 members, and asking for financial support for their paper. Engels agreed at first. However, when Bakunin began spreading the Circular in late December, Terzaghi's section decided they would send a delegate to the new Congress the Jura Federation called for. Engels rescinded his offer of money along with an angry letter on January 6, 1872, decrying Terzaghi for not waiting for the Council's response, which

⁵¹ The First Socialist Schism, p. 109-114

unity, not in centralization and dictatorship, but "upon a free federation of autonomous groups." This is because the Jura Federation endorsed the central anarchist idea of the unity of means and ends, believing that the way we structure our organizations now should reflect the kind of future ideal we wish to achieve, whereas hierarchical structures would only grow more opposed to emancipation. They therefore conclude with a call immediately for a new General Congress:

The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalisation of the organization with which the International will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, be careful to ensure that this organization comes as close as possible to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship.

Our conclusion is that a General Congress of the Association must be summoned without delay.

Long live the International Working Men's Association!

Thus the Jura Federation led the movement for a mass protest within the International against the General Council.

It is worth noting that Bakunin had no hand in this Circular, but was nevertheless quickly blamed for it by Marx.³⁶

³⁶ The First Socialist Schism, p. 109

The End of the General Council's Influence in Italy

Meanwhile in Italy, Naples remained the center of the International, but had fallen below 300 members by June 1871. On August 14th, 1871, increasingly concerned about the existence of the International, the Italian minister of the interior ordered for the section to be dissolved and its leaders indicted for political subversion. No trial was ever held though, and only Cafiero spent any time in jail and had to pay a heavy fine. This political repression won them sympathy from the general public though, as Cafiero wrote to Engels:

Ah! Yes, my dear friend, the government has done us much good with its persecution. My arrest was a real treasure ... it broke the ice, and for more than 15 days all the newspapers of Italy spoke of nothing else but the International, incendiarism, the crazy communists, the callow youths who disavow the beliefs of their parents, etc ... In sum, for better or worse, the International in Italy is a fact, publically and frankly affirmed; it has entered to become part of the normal life of the people.³⁷

Despite this repression, the Neapolitan International continued to operate underground, officially reconstituting itself in December 1871.

The resolutions of the London Conference became known in Italy in November, and immediately caused serious issues. On November 13, 1871, Carmello Palladino wrote to Engels:

I have read some of the decisions taken at the last Conference; and I must tell you frankly that I simply do not accept them; both for the way that the

³⁷ Quoted in *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892*, p. 41

it. Now, seemingly out of nowhere, they had not only been drawn into this conflict, and in an open letter to Mazzini of all places, the General Council was attacking their own greatest anti-Mazzini champion. His response to Mazzini involved no actual substantive rebuke against Mazzini himself, except to the extent he (accurately) associated Bakunin with the International.

Cafiero was once again left to pick up the pieces of Engels' blunders. He affirmed Bakunin's many friends here and the positive general impression he had in the Italian International even among people who did not know him. He wrote back:

With regard to your declaration in reply to Mazzini, I must confess that if it had depended on me, I would have done everything possible to avoid its publication. I feel it is my duty to set out my opinion of this document clearly to you. I believe that declaration to be an eminently misguided act, [...] I believe that it was a mistake to pick an argument over a note [about Bakunin] lost at the foot of an article in the *Roma del Popolo* in order to fire the first shot of a battle whose outcome could not be calculated. With that document you have broken the eggs in my hand, as they say in Italy. With the help of the last clarifications on res 9, I was in quite a strong position and I was all set to write to you saying that I was delighted that you had given me the means with which I could ward off a terrible crisis in Italy, warmly entreating you not to insist on publication of the reply to Mazzini. And now I receive the *Gazzettino Rosa* with the fatal document there, black on white [...].⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 134

Frederick Engels⁴⁸

This is the letter Engels was so proud of, showing he had been “working hard” in Italy.

Technically, Engels is wrong here. In point 3 he claims Bakunin was not a member of the IWA in September 1868. In fact, he had joined a few months earlier in June or July, as I covered above.

More importantly, all this letter essentially amounts to is a “prove it” for the first claim, and the second claim is a factually inaccurate response which denounced Bakunin’s “narrow and sectarian programme,” while it was in fact Engels and the London Conference who had just imposed their own program which was now excluding “the vast majority of members of the International” in Italy as Engels had just days ago decreed that recognizing its legitimacy was a requirement for membership. Engels doesn’t even bother to explain to the Italians *how* Bakunin’s program is meant to be sectarian, intending it to be just taken for granted! More than anything else, Engels failed in Italy because he simply didn’t want to deal with people where they were or engage with Bakunin as representing a serious ideological split. Engels was too focused on the “real movement” to deal with real people.⁴⁹

Before the issue of the London Conference, the Italian workers largely did not know about Marx and Engels’ conflict with Bakunin. Rather, Bakunin was the member of the International most publicly combating Mazzini (Bakunin published in this same month his book *The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International*, which was far more successful as a rebuke), something he was originally doing with Marx’s blessing. The conflict between Geneva and London was largely unknown, as Engels had spoken to few others besides Cafiero about

⁴⁸ Marx/Engels, Vol 23, p. 60-61, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 132-133

⁴⁹ Italian Anarchism, p. 46

Conference itself was convened, which was certainly not in compliance with our General Rules; and for the paucity of delegates, who arrogated the rights of a general congress; and finally for the very tenor of those decisions, which in my opinion openly contradict the principles of our Association as established by our General Rules.³⁸

Cafiero, as the Council’s representative who needed to explain and defend their actions, similarly wrote to Engels on November 17, 1871 about the uproar resolution 9 was causing, begging for more information:

There has been a little agitation here because of that blessed Conference, which I shall not repeat as Palladino already speaks of it in his letter. That resolution no. 9 has been understood as a concession on the 3rd recital of our Rules. The idea of a political party, even one opposed to all the other bourgeois parties, caused scandal and there were cries of treason about bourgeois elements having joined the International and made their way as far as the Conference. I love to see how our founding pact is watched over so that it not be violated but rather scrupulously fulfilled. But I always like to keep quarrels and splits at bay. Please give us more information about this matter, though I believe that by this stage other complaints of the same nature will have reached you.³⁹

Engels kept Cafiero on his side by deceiving him about the nature of Resolution 9, saying it did not require the formation

³⁸ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 127-128

³⁹ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 129-130

of a workers' party at all, leading Cafiero to publicly defend it as actually supporting "Bakuninist" abstentionism in December.⁴⁰

Engels, who would himself recognized the Conference as an "illegal mechanism," responded back to Palladino on November 23:

I am sorry you think yourself duty-bound to tell me that you in no way accept the resolutions of the last Conference. Since it is evident from your letter that an organised section of the International no longer exists in Naples, I can only assume that the above declaration expresses your individual opinion and not that of the Naples Section, now forcibly dissolved.

The dig about the section being "forcibly dissolved" from the General Council's official secretary to Italy is a reference to this heightened police repression.⁴¹

Engels continued to respond to Palladino's objection point-by-point, but lied in his answers. He claimed that the sections had assented to the conference (they had not), and that no objections to its legality had been made (they had, even Engels agreed it was an illegal compromise).

With regard to Palladino's complaint about the small number of delegates, that this was outside of the Council's control, but that

Belgium, Spain, Holland, England, Germany, Switzerland, and Russia were direct represented. As to France, it was represented by practically all the members of the Paris Commune then in London, and I hardly suppose you would dispute the validity of their mandate.

⁴⁰ Italian Anarchism, p. 50

⁴¹ See *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 490

1. that these words, as Mazzini himself asserts, were spoken at a congress not of the International but of the bourgeois League of Peace and Freedom;
2. that the International congress, which met at Brussels in September 1868, disavowed this same congress of the League of Peace and Freedom by a special vote;
3. that when Citizen Bakunin pronounced these words, he was not even a member of the International;
4. that the General Council has always opposed the repeated attempts to substitute for the broad programme of the International Working Men's Association (which has made membership open to Bakunin's followers) Bakunin's narrow and sectarian programme, the adoption of which would automatically entail the exclusion of the vast majority of members of the International;
5. that the International can therefore in no way accept responsibility for the acts and declarations of Citizen Bakunin.

As for the other documents about the International, which Citizen Mazzini intends to publish shortly, the General Council hereby declares that it is only responsible for its official documents.

By order and in the name of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association,
Secretary for Italy,

all the spoken and written declarations of its influential members.”

And these are the documents he intends publishing. He begins by giving two samples.

I. "The abstention" (from political action) "went so far that some of the French founders [of the International] promised Louis Napoleon that they would renounce all political action provided he grant the workers I don't know what sum of material aid."

We defy Citizen Mazzini to prove this assertion which we regard as calumnious.

II. "In a speech at the Berne Congress of the League of Peace and Freedom in 1868, Bakunin said: 'I want the equalisation of individuals and classes: without this an idea of justice is impossible and peace will not be established. The worker must no longer be deceived with lengthy speeches. *He must be told what he ought to want, if he doesn't know himself.* I'm a collectivist not a communist, and if I demand the abolition of inheritance rights, I do so to arrive at social equality more quickly'."

Whether Citizen Bakunin pronounced these words or not is quite immaterial for us. What is important for the General Council of the International Working Men's Association to establish is:

The truth is that only Belgium, Spain, and Switzerland were represented. Holland and Russia were not represented at all. England and Germany were represented by members of the General Council, as well as Ireland, the United States, France, and Italy by Engels himself, which he conveniently leaves out. No such French mandate existed because the only communards in attendance were all delegates of the General Council. Engels also reasserted the line that the resolutions passed were of a "purely administrative nature," when resolution 9 especially marked a radical departure on an extremely important theoretical question.⁴²

Engels, the secretary to Italy for the General Council, the organization established to keep the workers "consistently informed" about what was going on in other countries, was trying to cover for the nature of the Conference by lying to the Italians about it.

Cafiero was not merely reporting on the criticisms other workers had against the London Conference, but even criticized it himself. He wrote to Engels on November 28:

Let me return again to the Conference, to tell you that this resolution no. 9 is creating embarrassment of all sorts for us, as it confuses a position that had been quite distinctly defined in the General Rules. [...] In other words, if that resolution remains, either my hands will be tied as far as my propaganda work, etc. is concerned and I shall be unable in any way to do what I do, or I shall have to stand unequivocally alongside those who reject it [...].⁴³

It is important to also note that the Sonvilier Circular would only reach Italy in late November and early December.

⁴² The First Socialist Schism, p.128-129

⁴³ Quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 130

Cafiero's reports and concerns represent the direct and authentic reaction of the Italian workers to the London Conference itself.⁴⁴

Facing intense backlash, on November 30th, Engels made the following declaration:

Citizen Giuseppe Boriani is accepted member of the International Working Men's Association and is authorised to admit new members and form new sections, on condition that he, and the members and sections newly admitted, recognise as obligatory the official documents of the Association, namely:

- The General Rules and Administrative Regulations,
- The Inaugural Address,
- Resolutions of the Congresses,
- The resolutions of the London Conference of September 1871.

By order and in the name of the General Council
Secretary for Italy,
Frederick Engels⁴⁵

Recognition of the legitimacy of the "illegal mechanism" of the London Conference was now an official requirement for membership within the International in Italy. Additionally, people also needed to recognize the Inaugural Address written by Marx, which had never been adopted by any Congress but which Marx treated as having authoritative commentary on the General Rules and was used to support Resolution 9.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ The First Socialist Schism, p. 130

⁴⁵ Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol 23, p. 56, cited in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 133

⁴⁶ See The First Socialist Schism, p. 98

The General Council was flagging badly in Italy, and needed some win to show the Italian people that they still meant business. Luckily, around this same time, the republican nationalist Mazzini was still waging his campaign against the Paris Commune and the IWA, publishing a series of articles called "Documents about the International." Here was Engels, secretary to Italy, to show the value of the General Council, working as the best informed center of communication to combat the errors and slanders spread about them.

Engels commented on this in a letter written to Paul Lafargue on December 9, 1871, stating "I have been working hard at Italy and we have now begun to shift the battleground; from private intrigue and correspondence we are moving into the public arena. Mazzini has given us an excellent opportunity..."⁴⁷

What was this excellent opportunity? Would Engels establish himself as the great defender of the International? Well, in Mazzini's attack, Bakunin had been mentioned in a footnote, quoting a speech he had delivered to the League of Peace and Freedom. The opportunity Engels saw was to "attack Mazzini and disavow Bakunin at one and the same time."

Engels had written the following letter on December 6, 1871:

TO THE EDITORS OF LA ROMA DEL POPOLO

In number 38 of *La Roma del Popolo* Citizen Giuseppe Mazzini publishes the first of a series of articles entitled "Documents about the International". Mazzini notifies the public:

"I ... have gathered from all the sources
I was able to refer to all its resolutions,

⁴⁷ Marx/Engels, Vol 44, p. 278, quoted in *The First Socialist Schism*, p. 491