London Anarchist Federation
The Problems With On Authority
March 8, 2022

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given moment, the working class as a whole is not sufficiently class-conscious to defeat capitalism without resorting to authority, *true social revolution is not possible at that moment.* As Marx said "The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves." to which I would add that "the workers themselves" can not be taken to mean some tiny sub-faction of the working class that is destined to become a new exploiting class.

On Authority is not a successful critique of Anarchism but a showcase of the shortcomings of Engels own thought, which has unfortunately continued unchallenged within most strains of Marxism and has led to the failure of all Marxist revolutions to bring about socialism. The go-to organisational form for most Marxists has been, and remains, the authoritarian top down party. These parties have inevitably attempted to destroy or co-opt the organic bottom up organisations of the working class that rise up to oppose capitalism before and during a revolution. When these parties have succeeded in taking control of a revolution, their structure inevitably creates a new system of exploitation over the workers, and has only been successful in making socialism synonymous with tyranny in the minds of many people, including significant chunks of the working class that should be the natural constituency for socialism.

agement decisions the workers also gain more de-facto control over the means of production regardless of the de-jure claims of their bosses. Likewise community organisations, by challenging landlords and local authorities, increase the de-facto control their members have over their neighbourhoods and infrastructure against the de-jure claims of landlords and the state. But the key to this is weakening worker obedience to the demands of state and capital so that we can pursue our own interests and build our own organisations.

And the structure of these organisations will play an important role in the result of any revolution they are a part of. If they are top down and authoritarian, then the gains they make from state and capital will be controlled by those in positions of authority within those organisations. Should they replace state and capital, control of the means of production will not go to the workers below them, but to the authorities that those workers are obedient to. This would simply shift power over the working class from one ruling class to another.

Relatedly, if those organisations of resistance to state and capital are built from the bottom up on the principal of free association, then the gains made against state and capital will flow to the workers, creating a real change in material conditions. Any successful revolution in which these organisations seize the means of production will genuinely put them under the control of their members; the working class. These organisations will have to confront the capitalist class in order to do this, but with force, not authority. We do not need to integrate the capitalists as a class into socialism in the same way that capitalism must integrate the working class, therefore we need no authority over them.

Some Leninists might still advocate authority as a method by which one more "advanced" elements of the working class bring other elements of the working class into line in the fight against capitalism. But this can only ever re-create a class dynamic within the workers' organisation and sabotage our own goals. If, at a



## "Read On Authority"

It has become a meme lately for Leninists to reply to every anarchist criticism of Leninist theory or practice with "read On Authority!". Well, I am an anarchist and I have read on Authority, and I gotta say, it did not do anything to challenge my anarchism. However, it did provide a jumping off point to clarify what the real differences between anarchism and Marxism are, and why I personally find Marxism, especially in its Leninist form, an incomplete system of analysis.

I recommend that anyone reading this who has not read On Authority to go and do so, so that you can confirm that I am not doing Engels a disservice in how I interpret his ideas. On authority is a fairy short text and any complete summary of it I could provide would probably end up being not that much shorter than the original. However, I believe the passage below sum up Engels' stance on what authority is:

> "Authority, in the sense in which the word is used here, means: the imposition of the will of another upon ours; on the other hand, authority presupposes subordination. Now, since these two words sound bad, and the relationship which they represent is disagreeable to the subordinated party, the question is to ascertain whether there is any way of dispensing with it, whether — given the conditions of present-day society — we could not create another social system, in which this authority would be given no scope any longer, and would consequently have to disappear."

To the question which Engels poses in the second half of this passage; is authority possible to dispense with in the current conditions, he answers that it is indispensable. I will quote his reasoning for this as I go through each of the problems I have with Engels critique.

There are five main problems with Engels argument as a method of critiquing Anarchism. The first four are problems with how Engels fails to understand the anarchist critique of Authority, and goes off attacking positions anarchists do not hold and does not discuss the positions we do hold. The last problem is a broader one about how Engels' framing of authority ends up obscuring dynamics within capitalism and important choices we must make about how we organise against it.

## Problem One: Authority As Force

The first problem with On Authority is with Engels' misunderstanding of anarchist theory around the use of force. Engels assumes force to be a kind of authority, and in assuming this he comes to the conclusion that anarchists must reject force as part of our rejection of authority.

> "Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists."

However, anarchism as a whole clearly does not reject force. While there are pacifist and reformist currents within anarchism, the vast majority of anarchists are revolutionaries who understand and accept that a revolution entails a great deal of force.

To be fair to Engels, it is true that anarchists oppose the imposition of one person's will upon another, which is the definition that he uses for authority. The core tenet that anarchism is built on is



authority. This means that a failure of authority often results in its fracture instead of its reduction, with warlords maintaining local authority just despotic as the centralised state they replace.

However, a failure of state and capitalist authority is one of the key elements in a revolutionary situation that *could* lead to socialism. But there need to be a body of people already practiced in socialist, and thus necessarily anti-authoritarian, institutional forms and the cultural norms that support them, to present an alternative to simply rebuilding authoritarian institutions.

This is what Engels misunderstands when he talks about the anarchist conception of revolution. He says "the anti-authoritarians demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed." But the real point that anarchists make is that the social conditions are changed by the conflicts that lead up to a revolution, and the abolition of the political state is simply the coup de grace at the end of a long and arduous process that has already undermined the conditions that maintain state and capital.

Any revolution that is going to bring about real social change is going to be based in organisations that have already embedded themselves among the workers well beforehand and are able to step up to coordinate society as the institutions of state and capital collapse. As such they will have justified their existence to workers before the revolution by successfully fighting for their interests; worker councils, solidarity networks, mutual aid groups, anti-police groups, and the various other organisations that can defend the needs and desires of a working class which is otherwise expected to ignore their own agency for the profit and power of their masters.

But as these organisations champion the interests of the working class, they also change the material conditions of society. As workplace organisations' successfully confront capitalists, more of the wealth of society will flow to the working class in wages, and less will flow to the capitalists in profit. In contesting man-

on Afghanistan not because of their inability to deploy force, but because of their inability to build legitimate authority. While the American occupation of Iraq has been somewhat more successful, the state they built there is no more stable or functional than the state they replaced, again despite a massive advantage in the use of force they have over that old state. A state can use force to destroy, but a state needs authority to build and to govern.

And this authority is necessary for the operation of capitalism as a system. Wile some capitalists may be able to exploit a breakdown in authority for profit, they often can only do so from a position of secure authority elsewhere, and capitalism in general requires authority to function because of the inherent balance of power between the capitalist class and the working class in terms of a contest of raw force.

The working class outnumber capitalist class massively, and also does all the grunt work within capitalism that keeps capitalism running and enriching the capitalist class. But the shared interests of the working class are in conflict with the interests of the capitalist class; the capitalists need to exploit the working class for surplus value, while this impoverishes the workers. So the capitalists sit at the head of an economic system which requires the integration of a class that, should it ever unify around its own shared interests, could overthrow that system via their sheer numbers and the pivotal role they play in the reproduction of that system. Because of this the workers must be made to deny our own shared interests in favour of the interests of the capitalist class; We must be made obedient. If this was not the case a socialist revolution would be impossible, as no matter how conscious and organised the working class was we could always be crushed by force.

While authority is central to the maintenance of the current system, its negation is not enough to create a socialist society. When state authority fails, people, especially those who were embedded in a state or capitalist hierarchy, often continue to organise in the ways they are familiar with and attempt to rebuild hierarchies of



that individuals should be free to both construct their own sense of self and their own goals, and be empowered to pursue those goals, something I will call *agency*, but is also called freedom or liberty. The kind of society which I fight for is one in which all people can truly be themselves and pursue their needs and desires as they themselves understand them.

Engels' mistake is to assume this entails a blanket rejection of force. It is understood by anarchists that people's desires can be completely incompatible and that sometimes the imposition of one person's will on another is justified in order to prevent a worse imposition. A clear cut example of this would be in the case of a serial killer whose desire is to murder other people. Allowing them to be themselves and pursue their desires would result in the deaths of others, which would put an end to their victim's agency pretty definitively. Someone using force to defend themselves or others against such a killer would ultimately result in less imposition than if the killer was allowed to do as they pleased, and so such self defence is acceptable to most anarchists.

Therefore, when it comes to revolution and "the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon", the vast majority of anarchists have accepted this as a necessity to assert the thwarted desires of the working class against a capitalist and governmental minority whose own desires rely on the suppression and exploitation of those under them. Again, the force used in a revolution would be to expand and defend the agency of people who are currently imposed upon, ultimately resulting in a society of greater agency and less imposition. Because of this anarchists have always been involved in revolts and revolutions when we are able.

Part of the confusion around this is in the fact different thinkers use different definitions for "authority". Among anarchists there is a current that considers force a form of authority and a current that uses the words "authority" and "force" to indicate different concepts. But most anarchists of both camps accept the use of force

to impose upon a person when that force is necessary to prevent or overturn a greater imposition.

Because of this, anarchists who use a definition of authority that is similar to Engels' would not describe themselves as against all authority, but against all unjustified authority or all unjustified hierarchy. On the other hand, anarchists who do describe themselves as against all authority would not accept Engel's inclusion of force as a form of authority. Either way, Engels critique misses the mark on the anarchist approach to force.

I personally am in the camp that does not consider force to be a kind of authority, as we have a perfectly good word to describe force without having to use "authority" and so confuse force with other kinds of human action. From this point on when I talk of authority I am *not* including force within my definition.

## Problem Two: Authority as Organisation

The second problem with On Authority is more complex. Engels describes organisation as inherently authoritarian, and while doing so he misrepresents anarchism again, but he also makes a point that anarchists disagree with without engaging with why anarchists might disagree. Engels uses the example of a cotton spinning mill to make his point:

> "Thereafter particular questions arise in each room and at every moment concerning the mode of production, distribution of material, etc., which must be settled by decision of a delegate placed at the head of each branch of labour or, if possible, by a majority vote, the will of the single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way."

And later sums his point up thusly:



## Problem Five: Obscuring Social Relations

Authority as obedience, the authority that Engels ignores in On Authority, is a very important concept to understand as this is one of the key mechanisms by which the current system maintains itself. While outright force plays an important role, force alone is not sufficient to maintain the current system of state and capital. The institutions required to deploy force in defence of the current system are expensive, and they themselves rely on hierarchies of unquestioning obedience in order to function. The use of force to compel compliance also often results in collateral damage and unintended consequences that further raise the cost of its use.

In so far as state and capital can rely on their subjects and agents to obey them without having to use force, they can avoid this cost. Force will still be necessary at the edges of the system to crush dissent before it can spread closer to the core of the system and spark resistance at a larger scale, but the larger the sphere of society that can be relied on to simply do what its told, the more functional and stable the system will be.

On the other hand, a state which can not rely on its agents to carry out its orders and has to deal with widespread disobedience from large sections of society is a state that is not long for this world. States which need to deploy vast amounts of force to keep their subjects in line and must constantly struggle with their own agents going off mission are considered failed states, and are often only able to maintain control of limited areas within the borders they claim, until they can either expand the sphere of their authority or they collapse entirely.

This is well illustrated by the recent failure of powerful states to occupy and impose their will on far smaller and militarily and economically weaker territories, despite having a massive advantage in the ability to deploy force compared to the previous state they tried to replace and the non-state opposition that they face. Both the United States and the Soviet Union failed to impose their will

ability of authority are separate questions. If the anarchist critique of authority is correct, even if authority can never be dispensed with, it is something we should never accept and we should attempt to counter and work around authority in all circumstances.

Take cancer as an example of something we live in a similar tension. We can not cure all cancers right now, and we may never be able to cure all cancers. But cancer is never a good thing, it is never considered useful, and it is never to be celebrated. We do a lot to avoid cancer and treat it when it appears. Even though we may never truly be rid of it, we work towards that goal and along the way we minimise the impact of cancer as far as we can. This is the anarchist approach to authority; it is a dangerous phenomenon that is never good for the society it grows within, and regardless of if it can be defeated once and for all, we push towards that aim as far as we can possibly go, and treat all outbreaks of authority as malfunctions to be fixed, not tools to be used.

But Engels does not take the tone of someone begrudgingly accepting that we may never be free from a social ill. While he is careful to talk about the necessity of authority in the context of the conditions of present day society, implying he does look forward to a society in which different conditions may render authority obsolete, he also shows a disinterest in the anarchist examination of what the problems with authority are or even what anarchists even mean by the word. Engels sees authority as something not simply unavoidable, but actually useful in the current conditions; a tool that socialists can use to further socialism and not a barrier that we must overcome and constantly be vigilant against. But again, the very nature of authority makes it structurally incompatible with socialism, so it must be overcome or we can not achieve socialism.



> "We have thus seen that, on the one hand, a certain authority, no matter how delegated, and, on the other hand, a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organisation, are imposed upon us together with the material conditions under which we produce and make products circulate."

Against this I must go back to the point that, while anarchists do oppose the imposition of one person's will upon another, we understand that we need mechanisms to resolve situations in which two peoples' desires conflict. In the context of organisation, it will often be impossible for everyone involved to get everything they want. People will have conflicting ideas about what needs to be done and how to do it. Some peoples' ideas will simply be wrong and thus impossible to fulfill. That some peoples' desires may win out and some peoples' desires may be thwarted in organising is not something anarchists believe we can abolish, although we do seek to limit the extent to which this happens to the minimum.

However, in Engels' discussion of this problem he ignores an entire category of methods for dealing with these conflicts. Engels talks about solving these problems entirely in the language of imposition, and dismisses any proposed alternative out of hand as nothing but wordplay:

> "When I submitted arguments like these to the most rabid anti-authoritarians, the only answer they were able to give me was the following: Yes, that's true, but there it is not the case of authority which we confer on our delegates, *but of a commission entrusted*! These gentlemen think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves. This is how these profound thinkers mock at the whole world."

Engels spends no time bothering to prove this statement, and does not expand on or even mention anarchist proposals on how to organise outside of this dismissive passage. But if we look at this as a problem of resolving conflicts of will and desire, there are clearly multiple ways of doing this that have real differences in the ways in which they impose upon those within an organisation.

Let us take two examples of different ways of selecting someone to oversee the whole process of production in some section that requires such a specialist. The first version of this we are all familiar with; a manager is appointed from above. They take control over the process of production and while they may listen to those under them, their subjects have no power to veto their decisions or hold them accountable should they have disagreements with how the workplace is organised. This manager answers to those above them, because they were appointed by them, and not those below them. Everyone reading this has probably had to serve under such a manager, and will also be aware of the cruelty and incompetence that such a lack of accountability enables.

But top down appointment is not the only way to do this kind of organisation. We could also organise from the bottom up, with those involved agreeing between themselves the procedures that they should follow, the specialist positions that are needed, their powers and how they should be filled. Importantly, those procedures, positions, and powers, being agreed from below instead of appointed from above, can be changed by those who have to live with them should they find them inefficient, corrupt, or malicious.

Comparing these two methods of organisation, there is a real difference in the kind of imposition they allow on the agency of the workers. In the top down form of organisation, those at the top get to make almost unlimited impositions on those below them, with no need to compromise with or make accommodations for the desires of the workers below them. In the bottom up form of organisation, procedures and specialist roles are only possible if they are built on accommodation and compromise between those involved.



sneaks the "necessity" of worker obedience and the class dynamic this empowers, unmentioned and unexamined, into Marxist theory.

## Problem Four: Authority As Necessity

The last of the minor problems with On Authority is that Engels does not deal with any of the actual critiques anarchists have of authority. He simply mentions that anarchists reject authority, and then goes on to attempt to prove that we are ignorant for doing so, because authority can not be done away with under the current conditions.

This is a common approach for opponents of anarchism, as those in authority often do their very best to make our points for us. Capitalists, politicians, managers, union bosses, community heads, and other such authorities are often obviously and unarguably corrupt or incompetent, and the rare ones who do attempt to do good are often ineffective and destined to be sidelined by the hierarchy they are working within. Such a system could only carry on if everyone thought there was no alternative to it, and that our only option was to pick between different configurations of authority.

However, in Engels' case his failure to touch on the anarchist critique of authority puts him in a very tight spot. Anarchists argue that systems of authority incentivise exploitation and their own reproduction, and that this system is inherently incompatible with socialism. Engels simply argues that authority is necessary without attempting to disprove or even examine this anarchist argument. So even if Engels did successfully prove his point, in leaving the anarchist point standing he would in fact be proving is that *socialism is impossible.*

Fortunately for all socialists, even this argument is flawed. The impossibility of fully ridding the world of authority and the desir-

Lastly, authority not only enables exploitation and oppression, but it systematically promotes it. Those with authority hold a special power in their society, one that allows them more control over their own lives and over the lives of others than those who do not have that authority. This makes the positions of authority something that people are willing to compete over, either out of a selfish desire to enrich themselves, or out a more selfless desire to improve their society.

This competition for authority means that those in authority must constantly act to keep their authority or risk loosing that authority to someone else who is better at seizing and maintaining it than they are. All authorities, not matter what they might want to use their authority to do, ultimately end up mostly using it to simply maintain and advance their own position. And those below them become tools to do this, a resource to be used and abused, not people whose needs and desires should be met.

This is inherently a class dynamic, and all authoritarian societies are class societies, regardless of if that authority is justified by divine right, private property, national interest, or the interests of the working class. Those with authority have more control over the system they run than those under that authority. The interests of those under them are suppressed in order for that system to function, and the any potential realisation and expression of those interests is a threat to that system and those who control it. In the anarchists understanding, authoritarian socialism is a contradiction is terms; the working class can not own the means of production within an authoritarian society as those with authority will be de-facto owners of the means of production, and so be another capitalist class standing over and exploiting obedient workers.

Engels' failure to grapple with this kind of authority ends up laundering it as a useful organising principal for socialists, whether this was intentional or accidental. Engels makes valid points about the necessity of force and the impossibility of everyone getting everything they might want from organisation, and behind them



In one structure, organisation is a tool for the will of those at the top, trampling the agency of those beneath. In the other structure, organisation is a method of balancing the desires of all involved in the pursuit of mutual goals and a mutual expansion of agency via the collective empowerment that organisation can enable.

Engels confuses these two structures, seemingly not understanding the difference between imposition and mutual compromise. He talks about delegates and elections as if he was talking about a bottom up from of organisation, but also talks about imposition as if he was talking about a top down form of organisation. In not drawing a line between imposition from above and free agreement from below, Engels muddles the issue, especially when he says that delegation makes no difference regarding the level of imposition a worker faces within an organisation. If this is the case, then it does not matter if the worker operates under top down management or bottom up agreement. As we shall see, this is a huge mistake on Engels part.

## Problem Three: Authority As Obedience

As part of Engels' disinterest in different methods of organisation, On Authority fails to discuss the kind of authority that is most important from the point of view of anarchist critique; authority granted by unquestioned obedience.

This failure is the most fatal problem with On Authority as a critique of anarchism. Authority as obedience is the kind of authority that the against-all-authority anarchists Engels is setting out to critique are talking about when we reject authority, meaning that On Authority completely misses its target. The against-all-unjustified-authority/hierarchy anarchists who are closer to Engels in their definition of authority also reject this kind of authority as unjustified, so in their case On Authority again fails to grapple with the real body of their critique of present society and Leninism.

This kind of authority is granted in any relationship where someone puts aside their own reason and their own needs to unquestionably follow the directions of someone else. The more unquestioning this obedience, the more authority that is granted. The kind of top down manager I talked about about in the previous section often wields this kind of authority, but it is different from the kind of responsibility a bottom up delegates might hold.

If you follow someone's instructions because you trust them, because they have specialist knowledge, or because you understand that following their instructions is in your own best interest, this is not unquestioning obedience. Should they betray the trust granted to them, or their knowledge prove to be incomplete or not applicable, or should they just turn out to be *wrong* in some way and their instructions counter to the desires and well being of those following them, you will simply stop listening to them. This is the kind of position that someone empowered from below holds. They have no expectation of obedience, and even if any formal position they might hold did not exist, their comrades would still listen to them because of their competence, knowledge, experience, or dedication.

On the other hand, a position of authority allows those who hold it to command those under them who would, were it not for the position they hold, think of them as incompetent, ignorant, and inexperienced chancers. They are obeyed regardless of if those under them think listening to them is in their own interest, or anyone's interest at all. They can screw up as much as they want in the eyes of those below them and face no repercussions in so far as those below them are genuinely obedient. Within a hierarchy of authority, those at each level answer only to those above them, and the ultimate highest authority answers to no one. Explaining this dynamic so plainly, it seems ridiculous that anyone would accept it, but it only takes a moment's thought to see that we live most of our lives in hierarchies of authority, even if those hierarchies never manage to obtain our perfect obedience.



As an anarchist who rejects *all* authority, this is what I mean when I use the word, and from this point on when I say "authority" I am referring only to the authority granted by unquestioning obedience.

Anarchists oppose this kind of relationship because the lack of accountability of those in authority to those below them enables exploitation and oppression. People who have been persuaded or pressured into putting aside their own needs and desires in favour of blindly serving the dictates of those above them are people who can be used as tools for the enrichment of their superiors. As socialists who seek to end exploitation and oppression, we would rather create a system of social organisation that makes this as hard as possible, not one that enables it.

It is also very hard, if not impossible, to use this kind of authority to serve those under you even if you did have their best interests at heart. The very conditions of their obedience also obscure what the interests of those at the bottom really are. The relationship requires the obedient to put aside their needs and desires, and so discourages them from even developing an understanding of what they want.

And if an obedient subject does come to an understanding of their own desires while remaining obedient to authority, their own obedience prevents them from expressing themselves to that authority. Between two equals, when one proposes some joint venture that the other feels would harm them, they can simply refuse to join in it. In an authoritarian relationship this ability to veto any joint action is one sided, with the obedient unable to opt out of the plans of their superiors. Because of this, those in authority can never know if those below them obey because they think their boss is acting in their own best interest or in the interest of the common good, or out of blind obedience. An authority can abuse and oppress their subjects without even realising the extent of the damage they are doing.