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When Bernie Sold Out His Hero, Anti-Authoritarians Paid



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Bernie Sanders, in his thirties, wrote and directed the documentary *Eugene V. Debs: Trade Unionist, Socialist, Revolutionary* (1979), and a picture of Debs hangs on Sanders's office wall. But the arc of Sanders's political career has moved in the opposite direction from the arc of his hero. Debs moved from polite dissent to courageously resisting illegitimate authority—landing him in prison and shortening his life. In contrast, Sanders moved from polite dissent to overt obedience—de-energizing anti-authoritarians.

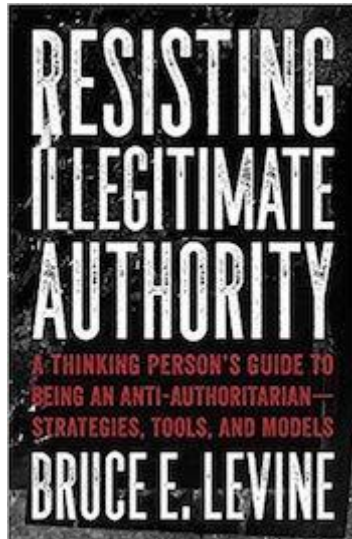
Debs is one of several anti-authoritarians who I profile in [*Resisting Illegitimate Authority*](#), a book about and for anti-authoritarians, many of whom have today been disillusioned by Sanders serving as a sheepdog for the Democratic Party (herding those who had fled from it back into it). Worse than other such sheepdogs, Sanders, from his earliest years in politics, has attempted to seduce anti-authoritarians by identifying with Debs but then, for career expediency, ignored what his hero's life taught him.

Debs, in his twenties, was a successful Democratic politician but gradually became radicalized by his experiences. In his late thirties, when jailed for leading the Pullman Strike, it became clear to Debs that both the Republican and Democratic Parties were owned by the ruling class. Debs moved from dissent to disobedience—ultimately disobeying not only the Democratic Party but the U.S. government.

Sanders began as an anti-war socialist and member of the Liberty Union Party which rejected the corporatism of both the Democratic and Republican Parties. After being elected to various offices in Vermont, Sanders supported military interventions that resulted in the deaths of many civilians, and he championed wasteful military expenditures that benefitted him politically (see Jeffrey St. Clair's [*Bernie & The Sandernistas*](#) for the unpleasant details). Ultimately, Sanders supported the Democratic Party's pro-corporatist and pro-militarist presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Sanders began with dissent but moved to obedience—obeying even the Democratic Party.

Sanders's initial dissent propelled his political career; his ultimate obedience kept his career intact; and by 2017, [polls reported](#) that he was the most popular politician in the United States. Sanders knows full well the life of Eugene Debs—and the price Debs paid for being a genuine anti-authoritarian who disobeyed illegitimate authorities.

As a young man, Eugene “Gene” Debs (1855–1926) had several jobs in the railroad industry. After leaving the industry, he maintained loyalty to his fellow workers as a



member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the editor of their *Firemen's Magazine*. He then went into politics and never lost an election running as a Democrat. The voters in his home town of Terre Haute twice elected him city clerk, and he was elected to the Indiana General Assembly in 1884 at age 29. However, after his bill to help railway workers was gutted, he became cynical of the legislative process and did not run for re-election.

In his late thirties, as the leader of the American Railway Union, the polite Debs initially believed that grievances with management could be settled by reason and compromise, but he soon recognized the naivety of this view. In 1894, Debs led the Pullman Strike, precipitated by the Pullman Company significantly cutting wages. Debs was initially reluctant to strike, reminding workers that the federal government might intercede militarily as it had previously done in the strike by silver miners at Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. However, when workers voted to strike, Debs led it. As Debs had predicted, President Grover Cleveland and Attorney General Richard Olney got an injunction against the Pullman Strike. The injunction was enforced by the U.S. Army, and this broke the strike. Debs was found guilty of contempt of court for violating the injunction and was sentenced to prison.

“Eugene Debs, a lifelong Democrat who three times campaigned for Grover Cleveland,” notes his [biographer Ray Ginger](#), “was deprived of faith in the major political parties by the actions of Cleveland and Olney. He could no longer advocate labor’s adherence to parties which were firmly controlled by the large corporations.” Bernie Sanders knows all this.

Debs was not a socialist when he began his first prison term in Woodstock, Illinois, in 1895. He recalled in 1902 in his article “How I Became a Socialist” that “a swift

succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes— and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed.*” It became clear to Debs that the ownership class has at its disposal “an army of detectives, thugs and murderers.” It also became clear to him that this ownership class owned most of the press, the Republicans and Democrats, and the judiciary. Beginning in 1900, Debs ran as the Socialist candidate for president of the United States, and would ultimately run five times. In the 1912 presidential election, Debs obtained 6% of the vote, and running from a prison cell in 1920, he garnered 3.4% of the vote.

Debs received his most severe punishment from the Democratic Party and the U.S. government after speaking out against its entry into World War I. Democrat Woodrow Wilson had been re-elected president in 1916 on his pledge of neutrality; but, pressured by Wall Street, which had engineered large war loans to the English and French, Wilson reversed himself on U.S. involvement and venomously attacked those who did not follow suit.

In 1918, Debs gave a speech in Canton, Ohio, stating: “Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder. . . . And that is war, in a nutshell. The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles.” Debs told the thousands of people in the Canton audience, “They tell us that we live in a great free republic; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people,” and the crowd responded in loud laughter. Debs responded to their laughter, “This is too much even for a joke.” For this speech, Debs was sentenced to ten years in a federal penitentiary.

Wilson’s venom for Debs was such that even after the end of the war, Wilson announced, “This man was a traitor to his country and he will never be pardoned during my administration.” Wilson even denied a pardon for Debs when it was recommended because of Debs’s poor health by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer (notorious for his “Palmer Raids,” incarcerating and deporting dissenters). It was the Republican president Warren Harding, following Wilson, who commuted Debs’s sentence in 1921.

Previous to prison, Debs had suffered from recurrent headaches, severe rheumatism, and debilitating low back pain; and Ginger notes, “Prison food had completely wrecked his stomach and his kidneys.” Prison time for Debs exacerbated his health issues, and he died in 1926, shortly before he would have turned 71 years old.

Bernie Sanders knows full well the life of Eugene Debs and what it says about the U.S. government and the Democratic Party. Sanders also knows the fate of a genuine U.S. anti-

authoritarian: At best, they will be shunned—ask Ralph Nader [whose phone calls Sanders has not returned since 2000](#); or in Debs’s case, thrown in prison; or, even worse, they will be assassinated—ask the friends and family of Fred Hampton.

Sanders, an astute politician, has long known that simply labeling himself as a socialist separated him out, giving him the appearance of being rebellious and making him quite popular, as long as he never moved beyond easy dissent to difficult disobedience. Sanders knows full well that real disobedience results in being crucified by the mainstream press, as was the case with both Debs and Nader. Sanders knows that dissent without disobedience is no threat to authoritarians in power. As I show in *Resisting Illegitimate Authority*, by profiling several genuine U.S. anti-authoritarians, only disobedience truly threatens authoritarians, and so it is severely punished in a variety of ways.

In 2017, the town of Woodstock, Illinois, where Debs served his six-month prison stint for leading the Pullman strike, evidenced some political fortitude by [honoring Debs](#). It’s not too late for Sanders, who dishonored Debs by supporting the pro-militarist and pro-corporatist Hillary Clinton, to regain some of his honor.

Sanders can begin by telling Americans these truths: that safe dissent without strategic disobedience is easily ignored by authoritarians; that without the defiance of strikes, working people will continue to get screwed; that without the disobedience of financial boycotts, immoral corporations and violent governments are unmoved; and that without brave men and women refusing to be obedient soldiers, insane wars continue.

Debs discovered these truths the hard way through his life experience, and Sanders learned these truths the easy way from studying the life of his hero. While Sanders lacks his hero’s courage to actually disobey illegitimate authorities, he can regain some honor—and re-energize some anti-authoritarians—by at least telling Americans what he knows to be true: that while dissent can be effective in a genuine democracy, only strategic disobedience is effective with authoritarian rule.

It might also re-energize a few anti-authoritarians if Bernie apologized to them in this manner: “I’m sorry, sorry for you and sorry for me. Here, I sold what was left of my soul, and Trump beat Hillary anyway. Maybe God—not the one of organized religion but the God of the great anti-authoritarian Spinoza—is trying to tell you and me something about selling out.”