“Who Has To Do It?”: A Reflection on the Compulsion to Coerce

Lee Shevek

2022-07-29

Anarchist Archive

anarchist-archive.org · anarchist-archive@riseup.net

When exploring the potential challenges of a liberatory future, one of the most frequent subjects we reflect upon is that of how our labor might be organized to attend to the needs of all without domination and hierarchy. There is no shortage of theory proposing various answers to these questions and it is not my intention, in this essay, to do the same. Rather, I intend to explore the root beliefs in one of the most regular questions radicals of all tendencies are asked: "How will we make people do the dirty and undesirable work if there is no state or police?"

The answers we may offer are plentiful: "Well, there's actually very few jobs out there that someone won't do willingly for their communities!" "Believe it or not there are people who really like that kind of dirty job." "We'll take turns doing the undesirable jobs." "We'll provide extra incentives for those who want to volunteer to do that work!" "We'll advance automation to the point that no one needs to do that work at all."

All of which have different merits — and pitfalls —and are accepted or rejected by the asker typically based on how much they believe that humans are inherently driven by personal self-interest and profit. When we encounter those who accept our answers as sufficient, we often pat ourselves on the back for a job well done and consider it a moment of radicalization. Perhaps, to a degree, it is, but it is my assertion that a conversation that stops there is a conversation that misses an opportunity to challenge a belief fundamental to capitalist and state power and the most important part of the initial question: how do we *make* people work?

As long as we refuse to unpack the underlying beliefs of that question, we will continue to struggle to articulate, agitate, and create conditions for a liberated world. It is one of the most central tenets of capitalism and, indeed, of all forms of authoritarian power. The belief that if a form of labor is valued highly enough it could be seen as acceptable — even in a liberated world — to force someone to perform it.

It is my assertion that our work isn't to answer that question satisfactorily (it is a rare moment when someone is satisfied with our answer anyway) but to create a world so fundamentally different from this one that a question like that *cannot even make sense.*

If there's a task in a liberated future that absolutely no one wants to do, the question we would be asking, if it were truly liberated from domination and hierarchy, would be "how do we shift our lives so that this task is not necessary?" rather than "how are we going to force someone to do this task?" We cannot on one hand reject domination, but on the other accept that there are some forms of work that are so necessary that — if we don't come to some other satisfactory solution — it would be acceptable to coerce someone into performing that labor for us. Yes, it is true that, in general, there will be someone willing and interested in doing most tasks that we personally might find repulsive. Yes, it is true that in the face of personal or community desire that people will (and already do) step up to get the task done simply because it needs doing, or because the reward of community appreciation

is enough, or because of a personal satisfaction one feels after completing it. However, should we come across a task that we would like to see done but are unwilling or unable to do it ourselves and are incapable of finding anyone else who would engage in it willingly, we need to do some serious introspection of our values when our response to that situation is to assume that the next step would inevitably be finding a way to coerce someone into completing it.

Perhaps the proper response to that question is another question: "Why do you believe that there is any circumstance in which it is acceptable to force someone to labor against their will?"

Perhaps our answer is to say, simply, that we have no intentions of *making* anyone do anything. Perhaps it is our responsibility to reject the question entirely, and to similarly reject offering any "answer" in response. No, we will not make anyone do any labor. No, we will not concede to the belief that doing so is, or ever has been, necessary for our survival. To do so would be not only to validate but *recreate* a system conditioned on the belief that some people get to determine what other people do with their minds, their bodies, their time, or their lives. It would inevitably demand that we find ways to make societal distinctions between the "us" who claim the ability to coerce and reap the benefits of that coercion and a "them" who it is acceptable to force into labor by one manner or another. It would require us to amass and then continuously maintain power to perform such coercion sustainably over time and to suppress any resistance to it.

No, we will not engage with the logic of power and domination on its own terms. We are building new ground upon which to thrive, where each and every one of us does so with our whole hearts and by our own will.

If no one willingly goes down into the mines, we will create ways of being that don't require the resources there. If there is a task that no will do willingly, neither for the sake of the task itself nor for the community appreciation that would result from it, we can take that as a sign that we need to find a way to organize our social system in a way that makes that task unnecessary. Rather than falling back into the logic of our upbringing, the logic of authoritarianism, we can recognize our amazing collective capacity for creativity as the strength it is and work to exercise it. Rather than accepting the terms that logic sets, we can see it as diametrically opposed to the values we are fighting for and ask a different question instead: why do so many of us still believe, consciously or not, that extracting labor via coercion is ever something that can be justified?