

# Self-Help vs. Power-Hunger

I was recently on an NPR panel on “Capitalism” with a pair of self-identified socialists – Kristen Ghodsee and Vivek Chibber. The hosts asked us a wide range of questions, including several of the form: “What would you say to a person with problem X?” For example, they played a statement from someone who really disliked her job as a COVID nurse. What should she do?

Literalist that I am, I tried to offer helpful, relevant advice. I started with the First Law of Wing-Walking: Keep your current job, but intensively search for a better position. As I’ve explained before:

*Happily settle for your first tolerable job offer... but only temporarily. Once you’re secure in your new position, at least keep your eyes open for a better opportunity. Something’s bound to come along eventually – and when it does, you can bargain with confidence.*

*Better yet, virtually any job yields valuable experience and career connections. As a result, you have more than happenstance on your side. Month after month, year after year, the odds tilt more and more in your favor – especially if you strive to impress your whole social network with your professionalism.*

Since the unhappy nurse disliked her irregular hours, I pointed out the wide range of nursing positions. Some nurses have totally regular hours in a doctor’s office or school. Others pull all-nighters at the ER. Switching from one track to another takes time, but with determination and flexibility, any qualified nurse can probably pull it off in a matter of months.

The socialist panelists, in contrast, bizarrely claimed that such efforts were hopeless, and told the nurse that left-wing political activism and/or unionization were the only viable remedies. When I pointed out that such methods are notoriously *ineffective* (when they don’t lead to total disaster), they doubled down. I pressed them further. If a young family member asked for career advice, would they seriously tell them that self-help is futile and steer them toward collective action instead? As far as I recall, my counterparts refused to engage this challenge.

Late in the interview, one of the hosts asked something like, “Is belief in the efficacy of

self-help the fundamental difference between you?” The socialists quickly affirmed that it was. I probably just said, “It is *one* important difference.” After the recording session ended, however, this issue stayed in my mind. Any individual obviously has the power to unilaterally *mess up* their own lives. Just become a violent drunk on the job for a day and watch your career die. How then can you imagine that the opposite path of self-improvement is a waste of time?

After a few days, however, the tension between socialism and self-help became clear.

Suppose you’re very power-hungry. Do you want people to think they’re able to fix their own problems? Of course not. If individuals can help themselves by doing a good job, learning new skills, making friends, and keeping their eyes peeled, what do they need *you* for? In contrast, if people believe that collective action is the path forward, the collectivity will clearly need leaders. And who will fill these leadership positions? The socialist activists, naturally.

Yes, this is a lurid picture: Power-hungry pundits push the absurd position that collective action is more likely to succeed than self-help – and then get to rule whatever collectivity they manage to inspire. How many socialists consciously embrace this master plan? Since I lack telepathy, I honestly don’t know. Still, the frequency with which bleeding-heart socialists become bloodthirsty tyrants reassures me that I’m not paranoid.