

Listening

By Colin Meinrath



Active Listening

How should socialists engage with others? The essence of socialism is caring and showing respect for others. One of the most important ways of embodying socialist values when we reach out to other people is through active listening. The practice of deep, proactive listening is fundamental to our politics.



It may seem obvious, but it's easy to forget when we're in a rush to explain our principles to the wider world. All too often, politicians talk, talk, talk – and when they do listen, it is at a surface level, as though they are only waiting for their turn to talk again. Having someone hear you, but not really listen to you, is always a frustrating experience.

The New Syndicalist website lists these specific practices involved in genuine, active listening.

1. **Ask open-ended questions:** You don't want yes/no answers, you want them to open up.
2. **Effective pauses:** Pausing is powerful. Use it for emphasis, to encourage someone to keep talking or to defuse things when people get emotional.

3. **Minimal encouragers:** Brief statements to let the person know you're listening and to keep them talking.
4. **Mirroring:** Repeating the last word or phrase the person said to show you're listening and engaged. Yes, it's that simple — just repeat the last word or two.
5. **Paraphrasing:** Repeating what the other person is saying back to them in your own words. This powerfully shows you really do understand and aren't merely parroting.
6. **Emotional Labeling:** Give their feelings a name. It shows you're identifying with how they feel. Don't comment on the validity of the feelings — they could be totally crazy — but show them you understand.

Failure to Listen

The failure to listen is a systematic feature of unequal relationships in class society: The boss does not have to listen to the worker. The authoritarian husband is deaf to his own family. White workers can 'tune out' the cries of their racialized peers.

Oppression manifests in countless ways, yet all forms signify a stubborn refusal to listen to the distress, fear, and pain of others — or in other words to grant that their suffering matters at all. In this way, some people are valued less than others, reproducing social inequalities.

The failure of powerful elites to listen to ordinary people in good faith was most recently dramatized in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Trump's win was inseparable from Clinton and other neoliberal Democrats' false claims to be responsive to ordinary people — even as her campaign avoided any acknowledgement of the painful economic crises battering the American working class.

Trump showed up and took maximum advantage of this callous elitism. All he had to do was listen. He literally mined social media, figured out what voters really cared about (the economy, stupid) and fed it right back to them, riding their longing for leaders who listen all the way to the White House.

Yet Jennifer Palmieri, Hillary Clinton's former communications director, insisted that the wave of post-inauguration protests around the country should not be interpreted to mean that people have economic needs worthy of policy makers' attention. She stated:

“You are wrong to look at these crowds and think that means everyone wants \$15 an hour. Don't assume that the answer to big crowds is moving policy to the left...It's all about identity on our side now. They want to show, ‘He [Trump] does not support me. I support you, refugee. I support you, immigrant in my neighborhood. I want to defend you.’ ...And I think it's like our own version of identity politics on the left that's more empowering, and I think that's we're — that's a safer place to be.”

While making a public display of pretending to care about protesters, Palmieri completely dismisses what the protesters say. She completely fails to hear them, while attempting to take credit for listening to them. This type of “false listening” should always be avoided. For Palmieri, supposedly Left-leaning Democratic politicians should just ignore people’s economic suffering because it’s not politically ‘safe.’ What does that mean? It’s a euphemism helping to disguise the fact that the ruling class has no intention of implementing any downward economic relief, let alone a real redistribution of wealth.

The kind of hardline neoliberalism we see in today’s Democratic Party motivates the fake listening of opportunistic politicians. They are rather more interested in lowering people’s expectations and distracting them from the undeclared class war being waged against them.

Subversive Listening

Socialists can take a stand against neoliberal capitalism by actively listening to working people, by exposing the fake listening of bourgeois politicians, and by amplifying the voices of the unheard, as they struggle to make ends meet amid ongoing recession and spreading poverty.

Active listening can also be a means of liberation from the social inequalities that prop up class power. When socialists go out of their way to subvert oppressive (and seriously irritating) patterns of interpersonal communication, they strike at the heart of working-class division. This kind of subversive listening helps make our movements a more authentic refuge for those with the most to lose from the system.

Our perspective is that teaching others about socialism is equally about learning from them in turn. It’s about dialogue and mutuality. This emphasis of shared communication is necessary to help counteract bad communication habits encouraged by the ego-centric culture of me-me-me capitalism. This mindset of "I must be listened to, but need not listen to others" is unequal at heart, and opposed to socialist values.

A preachy or self-centered communication style can turn people away from the movement, causing them to feel like they won’t be understood or simply can’t relate. The antidote is a praxis of active listening, leading (hopefully) to understanding and a willingness to genuinely consider the other person’s position or ideas – even if you think you’ve heard it all before and already know what they think and why they’re wrong. You never know what you might hear with fresh ears.

Politics Are Personal

People have a lot of strongly held opinions, but most people have not formed opinions on most things. We all often go about life without questioning the social fabric that we inhabit and the social constructs that we participate in. Land ownership, cleaning duties, encounters with police or fascists. The capitalist class knows how to divide workers. Most workers aren't inclined to dislike immigrants, but when immigrants are also being used as scabs, the fight for solidarity can become much more difficult.

There are always people who uphold or challenge particular practices or institutions, but on the whole there are also an abundance of open minds on any given issue. Reformists, reactionaries and revolutionaries all compete to win people over to their worldview. Individuals in each of these categories also tend to lump the other two together. Once a person familiar with conservative appeals better understands the history of solidarity against attacks on the working class, they may approach situations differently.

While listening, we will undoubtedly encounter views we find reactionary. Many reactionary views are ones that direct blame at others based on broad categorizations. "Why should a person who works at McDonalds make as much as me?" "Why do people in the city attack the police? We're suffering too!" When this happens, it can be best to respond in with a personal experience (of a friend who's faced mistreatment, for instance) than with hostility and accusations. Views can be challenged, but once tempers are raised in an argument pre-existing views will only be entrenched. Through listening, we will come to better understand the many liberating forms of social organization that others are already creating around us.

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