

Socialist Alternative candidate wins in Seattle City Council election

By Joseph Kishore
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Socialist Alternative candidate Kshama Sawant has been pronounced the winner in City Council elections in Seattle, Washington held earlier this month. The longtime incumbent, Democrat Richard Conlin, conceded defeat late last week after revised vote totals showed Sawant leading by 88,222 votes to 86,582.

The victory of Sawant—and the near-win of another Socialist Alternative City Council candidate, Ty Moore, in Minneapolis, Minnesota—reflects growing popular alienation from the Democrats and Republicans. The continued economic and social disaster resulting from the economic crisis and the policies of the ruling class is fueling increasing hostility to capitalism. Despite the relentless free-market propaganda of the media, opinion polls show a steadily rising number of Americans who say they are sympathetic to socialism.

However, aside from its implicit anti-big business connotation, the broad mass of the population has only a limited conception of what socialism actually signifies. Sawant's campaign exploited the latent sympathy for socialism without advancing demands that went beyond the boundaries of capitalism.

Sawant's victory is being hailed by an array of publications and organizations, including *CounterPunch* and the newspaper of the International Socialist Organization, *Socialist Worker*. In its article on Sawant's campaign, the ISO called her victory "a stunning result for a revolutionary socialist and a powerful symbol of the discontent with the political status quo."

There is no doubt that Sawant's vote expressed discontent with the status quo and a desire for change. But the description of the candidate as a "revolutionary socialist" borders on the absurd. Aside from occasional vague and non-committal references to socialism,

Sawant's campaign was conducted on the basis of nothing more than a moderately reformist capitalist program. Her electoral victory is no more threatening to American capitalism than the repeated election of Vermont "socialist" Bernie Sanders to the United States Senate.

Sawant's central slogans—for a \$15 an hour minimum wage, rent control, and a tax on millionaires to fund public transportation—echo demands that are now being inscribed in the platform of many local Democrats. In the course of the campaign, the principal establishment newspaper in the city, the *Seattle Times*, published a highly favorable column by Danny Westneat noting that Sawant's main proposals "are pretty much indistinguishable from those of current [Democratic] Mayor Mike McGinn or his challenger, state Sen. Ed Murray," now the mayor-elect.

Sawant's campaign touted the fact that the call for a \$15 an hour minimum wage had been taken up by Murray, a prominent figure in the Washington State Democratic Party establishment.

Aside from the fact that nothing in Sawant's program threatens capitalism, her campaign was not directed toward the mobilization of the working class as an independent force. She conceived of her campaign as a means of applying pressure on the Democratic Party.

In an article published Tuesday ("Will the minimum wage go up?"), *Socialist Worker* elaborated on the basic political conceptions shared by the ISO and Socialist Alternative. Sawant's election and a union-organized "Fight for 15" campaign are part of a broader push to raise the minimum wage, the ISO wrote, noting that "President Barack Obama has supported legislation that will raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$10.10."

While suggesting that one should be "skeptical"

about Obama's support for a minimum wage increase, the ISO went on to gush that his position "does show us...that our movement is gaining momentum." Obama and other capitalist politicians are "feeling the heat."

In fact, the Obama administration, acting on behalf of the corporate and financial aristocracy, has presided over a coordinated attack on the wages of the entire working class. It is notable that in Socialist Alternative's special election issue, which was used for mass distribution, there is not a single reference to the Obama administration or any of its policies. There is no reference to the bailout of the banks, the nationwide assault on wages, or the administration's attack on Social Security and Medicare. At no point did the campaign criticize the militarism of the Democratic president, drone assassinations, or NSA spying.

Socialist Alternative also boasted of the endorsement of many local unions, which otherwise continued to back Democratic Party candidates. These included the local chapters of the American Postal Workers Union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The King County AFL-CIO Labor Council officially backed Conlin, but several members of its board of directors openly supported Sawant.

At a local and national level, the unions supporting Sawant are collaborating with the Democratic Party and the corporations in a systematic attack on the jobs, wages and living standards of the workers they claim to represent.

The anti-working class character of these organizations was highlighted in the midst of Sawant's campaign by the rebellion of 31,000 machinists at Boeing—headquartered outside of Seattle—against the demands of the corporation, supported by both the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and Washington's Democratic governor, Jay Inslee, for major pension and health care cuts, along with a long-term wage freeze and no-strike clause. On Monday, Sawant participated in a rally called by the IAM, declaring her solidarity with the union. (See: "The workers' rebellion at Boeing")

Socialist Alternative, the ISO and similar groups represent a tendency within bourgeois politics. The difference between them and political operatives working directly within the Democratic Party is tactical

in character. There is a certain division of labor between Sawant and, for example, the new mayor-elect of New York City, Bill de Blasio (who once worked on behalf of Hillary Clinton), but their political outlook is fundamentally the same.

Writing in the *Washington Post* last week, *Nation* magazine editor Katrina vanden Heuvel, a staunch supporter of the Obama administration, wrote of a rising "democratic wing" of the Democratic Party in language that is virtually indistinguishable from that of the ISO and Socialist Alternative. Even the issues are identical.

Citing the election of de Blasio and the campaign to bring forward Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren as a possible presidential candidate in 2016, vanden Heuvel commented: "Progressive Democrats are waging fights to raise the minimum wage at the local, state and national level, with the White House signaling it will join at the federal level. Labor unions have found success in growing protests by fast-food workers demanding decent wages."

The political regroupment among pseudo-left organizations is an international trend. Socialist Alternative has called for a new coalition of like-minded groups, in alliance with the trade unions, to run 100 "independent" candidates in local elections next year. Their aim is to establish a political framework analogous to Syriza in Greece, the Left Party in Germany, and the New Anti-capitalist Party in France.

In all of these cases, these nominally "left" organizations are helping to prop up the capitalist system. Socialist Alternative, the ISO and similar groups are seeking to play a similar role within in the United States.

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