

Socialist Alternative councilwoman backs Democrats' minimum wage maneuver

Jerry White**21 January 2014**

In the face of growing popular anger over the worsening social crisis in the US, President Obama, who has overseen the greatest growth of social inequality in US history, has for the past month been posing as an opponent of social inequality and defender of working and poor people. Democratic Party strategists hope a dose of populist rhetoric combined with cosmetic micro-“reforms” will stem the growing alienation of the population from the entire political establishment.

In a December 8 speech on social inequality, Obama called for a rise in the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans expect the increase to pass, and even if it did, it would leave the minimum wage below where it was, in real terms, in 1968. This maneuver has been coordinated with the AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and various liberal and pseudo-left groups, which organized a series of protests by fast food workers the day after Obama’s inequality speech.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has conspired with the Republicans to cut off benefits for the long-term unemployed, slash food stamps and extend across-the-board “sequester” cuts, while they prepare to attack Medicare and Social Security. Obama’s health care overhaul has already been exposed as a scheme to slash benefits and increase out-of-pocket costs for tens of millions of workers.

In the state of Washington, the SEIU and the Democratic Party have received enthusiastic support for their minimum wage diversion from Socialist Alternative. Kshama Sawant, a Socialist Alternative member and leader of the “15 Now” coalition—which calls for a \$15 an hour minimum wage—was elected to the Seattle City Council in November.

Sawant was a vocal supporter of Proposition 1, a SEIU-backed voter initiative passed in November that ostensibly sets a \$15 wage floor for 6,000 airport and hotel workers

at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. The unions’ cynicism is summed up by the fact that employers at Sea-Tac who sign a union contract will be given a waiver from the wage mandate. This will give companies an incentive to sign the type of sweetheart deals the SEIU has used to build up its dues base, in which poverty wages are accepted in return for the SEIU gaining new members.

Ed Murray, a long-time Democratic Party state legislator, jumped on the minimum wage campaign to defeat his opponent in the recent Seattle mayoral election. Saying he wanted a \$15 minimum for city employees, Murray set up an Income Inequality Advisory Committee of business and union leaders. He issued a non-binding executive order to “begin a process” of raising the minimum wage.

Sawant, who was appointed to the mayor’s 23-member committee, hailed the toothless, non-binding agreement as a “welcome step.” She praised the Democratic mayor, telling the *Seattle Times* that the move “shows the mayor’s office is feeling the pressure from below to act on the rhetoric from the campaign.”

In addition to receiving funding from the SEIU and other unions, 15 Now is backed by venture capitalist Nick Hanauer, whose net worth is \$1 billion. Hanauer has argued that increasing wages will increase consumption and boost profits.

The 15 Now coalition came together for a celebration at Seattle’s Labor Temple on January 11. The turnout of only a few hundred people—mainly former anti-war protesters, union functionaries, Green Party members and Moveon.org “activists”—underscores the fact that the organizers of the campaign have no intention of mobilizing the working class.

To Sawant, the “working class” is the trade union bureaucracy, which supported her election campaign and to which she is now seeking to provide political cover. In her remarks at the rally, she never referred to Boeing

workers in nearby Everett, Washington, who last November rebelled against a brutal concessions contract negotiated by the International Association of Machinists union, only to be forced by the union to vote again on essentially the same deal in December. The IAM rammed through the eight-year contract extension, which ends company-paid pensions, slashes wages and imposes a ten-year ban on strikes.

Addressing herself to the trade union officials on the platform, including Martin Luther King County Labor Council President Dave Frieboth, Sawant said that the “most important thing the left must do was break our ties from those who have betrayed us again and again ... the two big business parties who haven’t stood up for us.”

But between Murray, Obama and the Democratic Party, on the one hand, and Sawant and Socialist Alternative, on the other, there are only tactical differences. Socialist Alternative and the other pseudo-left organizations that have rallied behind Sawant, such as the International Socialist Organization, have long functioned on the periphery of the Democratic Party.

Socialist Alternative is not fighting for the political independence of the working class and socialist consciousness. It conceives of an “independent” party as a political mechanism for applying pressure on the Democratic Party. Under conditions of growing working class disillusionment and disgust with Obama and the Democrats, it proposes, in the form of a nominally independent political formation, to establish a new means for preventing the emergence of a genuinely independent movement of the working class, which requires a complete break with the pro-Democratic trade union apparatus, and keeping popular opposition safely within the confines of capitalist politics.

The next speaker at the January 11 rally was Martin Luther King County Labor Council President Frieboth, a longtime ally of the Democratic Party and flunky of Boeing, who serves on the mayor’s advisory committee along with Sawant. Addressing Sawant, Frieboth said that he too had been an “activist” before engaging in the tough business of “representing others.” Now, he acknowledged, “I guess I am part of the problem.”

He warned that the “left can blow it” if it does not deal with “internal divisions,” pointing to what he called “sectarian” critics who said the unions were run by bureaucrats “tied to the hip to the Democratic Party.” Frieboth reminded the audience that the union bureaucracy had money and resources to run campaigns like 15 Now. “[The building] where we are sitting today

is owned by organized labor,” he said. “It is brought to you by bureaucrats like me.”

After delivering this filthy speech, Frieboth was given a standing ovation and a warm embrace from Sawant.

Also speaking was Joe Higgins, a leader of the Socialist Party in Ireland and former member of the European Parliament, who made it clear that the Sawant campaign was part of an international effort by pseudo-left parties to head off a movement of the working class. Their aim, he said, was to “fill the political void” left by the Social Democratic parties.

Whatever the rhetoric about “new parties of the working class” from Higgins and Sawant, both are engaged in a regroupment of Pabloites, state capitalists, neo-anarchists and other pseudo-left groups modeled after Greece’s Syriza, Germany’s Left Party and France’s New Anti-capitalist Party. These organizations function as the “left” wing of the capitalist political establishment, supporting austerity, the destruction of democratic rights, the suppression of the class struggle and imperialist war.

The Sawant election has become a cause célèbre for the entire middle class “left,” which sees in her “coalition-building” and electoral victory a quick road to win “political space” within the capitalist state apparatus, like their European counterparts. The prospect of winning electoral office means a level of influence and affluence previously unknown for these anti-Marxists. Sawant’s election to the City Council comes with an annual salary of \$120,000, a substantial pay raise for the former software engineer and part-time economics professor at Seattle Central Community College and Seattle University.

As its 15 Now campaign shows, the organization’s petty-bourgeois politics correspond with the need of the Democratic Party to refurbish its image and impose the demands of American capitalism on the working class.



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