

Obama's State of the Union and the fraud of Kshama Sawant

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The response of Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant to last week's State of the Union address by President Obama exposes the anti-working class and antisocialist perspective of Sawant and her organization, Socialist Alternative.

Far from exposing Obama's speech as a series of cynical lies and proposals he and his party never intend to implement, Sawant seeks to appeal to and foster illusions in the Democratic Party and the current president. With the help of vague socialist-sounding slogans, Sawant's aim is to provide cover for a political establishment whose bankruptcy is becoming increasingly clear to broad layers of American society.

Sawant's eleven-minute response, titled "The Socialist Response to Obama's State of the Union," was published January 20 on the website of Socialist Alternative. The response begins by declaring, "Six years ago, Obama was elected on the hope that he would represent the millions, not the millionaires." Sawant adds, "Six years later, will millions of Americans finally get the president they voted for?"

One wonders on what planet Sawant has been living for the last six years. Only those who voted for endless war, the establishment of the framework for a police state, widespread police repression, an unprecedented chasm between rich and poor, drone assassination and torture cover-up have received what they asked for in the 2008 elections. At the time, Socialist Alternative proclaimed Obama's election a "historic victory" which "opens up a new period in American history" because "a black man has now been elected to the highest office in the land."

Sawant directly follows her opening question with the statement: "Some of the proposals Obama made tonight point in the right direction," implying that workers and youth should keep their faith in Obama burning bright.

"But," Sawant wonders, "How does Obama plan to overcome the inevitable Republican obstruction? How will Obama get any serious measure to tax the wealthy or against climate change past the entrenched and undemocratic power of Wall Street and big business?"

Here, Sawant openly takes up a standard Democratic Party talking point and encourages workers and youth to believe that there exists a dichotomy between Wall Street and Obama. According to her, the "good" Democrats like Obama are really trying to do what they can for the American people, only to be thwarted at each corner by the Republicans.

What a fraud! Sawant and the Democratic Party hope to cover over the fact that Obama and the Democrats are responsible for handing over trillions of dollars to Wall Street through bank bailouts and quantitative easing, while simultaneously overseeing unprecedented cuts to social programs upon which tens of millions of workers and young people rely.

Sawant lauds Obama's speech, noting that he "spoke about helping the middle class. He spoke about housing issues," adding that "Obama's pledge to say No to Keystone XL and to cap methane emissions are necessary first steps."

After praising Obama, Sawant goes on to employ vague and hollow sloganeering to paper over her own apologies for the Democrats.

"We need to act here and now," She says. "Real progress is only won by millions stepping into action... We need a democratic socialist society based on international cooperation... We need to build our own political voice, a mass political party for working people... Independent working class challengers will be needed."

None of this means anything. In terms of proposals, Sawant puts forward a platform that vaguely calls for

higher spending on housing, rent control, increases in the minimum wage and—strangely—the banning of trains carrying coal and oil.

Sawant also rests on her record as a Councilmember for the northwestern city of Seattle, Washington, where Sawant and Socialist Alternative claim that they waged a “historic grassroots” campaign for a higher minimum wage, called the “Fight for 15.”

The law Sawant voted for (alongside a unanimous city council comprised of Democrats) is far from heroic. First, it does not apply to workers under the age of 18, even if they perform the same work. Second, the law will not require a \$15-an-hour wage until 2021 in any corporation with fewer than 500 workers, and 2017-2018 for larger corporations. Third, the wage increase will be worth \$12-an-hour by the time it takes effect for most workers. (See, “Seattle’s \$15-an-hour wage of little benefit to workers”)

Sawant’s election to the City Council in November 2013 was heralded by pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization as “a stunning result for a revolutionary socialist.” However, Sawant’s political record and response to the state of the union make clear that she and Socialist Alternative operate entirely within the orbit of bourgeois politics.

In effect, Sawant’s message to the ruling class is: “You can do business with us!” This is underscored by the fact that at no point in her speech does she call for an end to Obama’s renewed war in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, her response does not mention the section of Obama’s speech in which he defended the right of the US to wage preemptive war anywhere in the world. This omission is not an oversight. Sawant did not include it because she and the upper-middle class layer for whom she speaks support the imperialist policy of the American ruling class.

That Sawant and others like her call themselves socialist has no bearing on what they really are: defenders of capitalism and American imperialism. To the extent that they have grievances, it is not with capitalism itself, but with the uneven distribution of the proceeds of financial speculation within the top 10 percent.

The trade union bureaucrats and upper-middle class professionals who form the political base of groups like Socialist Alternative would like to see their own positions within capitalism strengthened, while

maintaining the domination of the political apparatus over the working class. It is this crucial *class* element that defines the relationship of Sawant and Socialist Alternative with American finance capital, and not the occasional socialist phraseology.

As Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done*, the task of workers and youth is to judge people and political tendencies “not by the glittering uniforms they don or by the high-sounding appellations they give themselves, but by their actions and by what they actually advocate.”

Kshama Sawant’s response to the state of the union address attests to the veracity of this crucial political lesson.



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