

Amazon-led corporate purge of Seattle City Council fails

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Late returns in the state of Washington's mail-ballot election have dealt a major setback to the efforts of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and the Seattle Chamber of Commerce to purge the Seattle City Council of members who supported higher taxes on big corporations.

In five of the six seats targeted for takeover, the business-backed Democratic Party candidates lost and the candidates regarded as more hostile to corporate power won, including Kshama Sawant, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative group, who won reelection to a seat she has held since 2013.

Sawant and another candidate targeted by Amazon, Andrew Lewis, had been trailing in the initial totals released by election officials on the evening of Tuesday, November 5, which consisted mainly of votes mailed in weeks ahead of election day. Young people and workers traditionally mail in their votes later, and Sawant and Lewis both surged from behind with late ballots.

By Friday, both Sawant and Lewis had moved into apparently insurmountable leads. Sawant led Egan Orion by 1,515 votes with only about 1,000 ballots still left to count in her District 3, with 51.57 percent of the vote. Assistant city attorney Lewis had 52.79 percent against former Seattle police chief Jim Pugel. The lone Amazon-backed candidate to defeat a more left-wing opponent, Alex Pedersen, had 52.34 percent of the vote against Shaun Scott, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Despite the frenzied rhetoric of both the Chamber of Commerce, on the right, and Socialist Alternative, on the "left," none of the 14 candidates in the runoff November 5 for seven seats on the City Council was an actual socialist. All but Sawant were Democrats, as the Republican Party plays only a marginal role in the city's politics, and endorsed all the business-backed Democrats.

As for Sawant, her organization, Socialist Alternative, is heavily involved in capitalist politics, supporting Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in both 2016 and 2020, and pledging to campaign for Sanders against Trump if he wins the

Democratic Party nomination. The group, despite its name, does not propose a "socialist alternative" to the Democrats, but supports Sanders nationally and other "left" Democrats in local Seattle politics, treating the Democratic Party as a political partner.

Sawant received the endorsement of several local Democratic Party organizations in Seattle, as well as the backing of two incumbent Democratic members of the City Council whose seats were not up for election this year. Sawant herself endorsed several of the "left" Democrats who were on the ballot with her November 5, including Tammy Morales, who won, and DSA member Shaun Scott, who lost.

The main feature of this year's City Council campaign was the intervention of the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, which established the Civil Alliance for Sound Economy (CASE) as its political action committee to remove from the City Council all those members who had supported the "head tax" on large corporations that was passed in 2018 and then hastily rescinded under pressure from big business and Democratic Mayor Jenny Durkan.

CASE and other corporate PACs raised and spent nearly \$5 million, an unprecedented sum for a City Council election, with Amazon alone pumping \$1.45 million into its coffers, including a well-publicized \$1 million "money bomb" in early October which was supposed to terrify all political opposition.

One of biggest chunks of corporate cash, \$617,592, went to Sawant's opponent, Democrat Egan Orion, a director of the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce and the Broadway Business Improvement Area, as well as a producer of Seattle's annual PrideFest, a corporate LGBTQ festival. Orion has been painted as a liberal by the local press due to his identity as a gay man and his utilization of identity politics. However, he has a track record of endorsing pro-business policies.

Despite all the money spent by corporate PACs on the preferred candidates of Amazon—from \$229,544 for Mark Solomon in District 2 to \$831,407 for Heidi Wills in District

6—the population by and large voted for their opponents. Rather than being intimidated by the influx of corporate cash, many voters were outraged and they went to the polls in unusually heavy numbers for an off-year local election.

Voter turnout in this latest round reached 55 percent across the city and 57.6 percent in Sawant’s District 3. In her first election in 2013, Sawant beat incumbent Richard Conclin by 1 percentage point, with a voter turnout of 52.5 percent. In her second election campaign of 2015, Sawant beat Pamela Banks by roughly 12 percentage points, with a citywide voter turnout of barely 30 percent.

While Sawant’s three election victories, in 2013, 2015, and last week, undoubtedly reflect a leftward movement among working people and youth, this is not a response to the specific policies of Socialist Alternative, which hardly differ from those of Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and other “left”-talking Democrats. It is part of the radicalization of workers and youth as a whole, reflected in surveys showing that 70 percent of youth in advanced countries now support socialism.

In Seattle, the city has witnessed a drastic economic and social polarization fueled by the expansion of the technology industry, led foremost by Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Google. The population has grown by 18.7 percent since 2010, making it the fastest growing city in the nation.

This urban development has been tied to the rise in inequality, housing costs, homelessness and gentrification. In 2018, the median household income reached \$93,000, up \$7,000 from 2017 and far higher than the national median income of \$63,179. By 2016, the top 20 percent of the population owned more than half of all wealth in the metro area, but the bottom 40 percent owned around 10 percent.

As in city after city, country after country, the working class and young population of Seattle has come to loathe Amazon and major corporations for the inequality, austerity, and exploitation associated with them. This general left-wing opposition found expression in the votes against Amazon-backed candidates and for their nominally “progressive” opponents, including Sawant.

However, the reality is that Socialist Alternative represents not the working class, but a section of the upper-middle class. Despite her socialist rhetoric, Sawant has worked closely with the Democratic Party in order to quell any real movement of youth and workers against social inequality. This has been verified by her political record in the Seattle City Council.

The head tax that was passed last year on corporations making over \$20 million a year, with the backing of the Democratic Party-controlled City Council, was repealed only four weeks later due to pressure from Amazon and other corporations. After the City Council unanimously

voted to reduce the original head tax from \$500 per employee to \$275, Sawant responded by praising the watered-down tax as a “win” for both big business and the working class, stating that it would not be a burden on big business and that “even a smaller tax is [a] huge victory.”

The \$15 Now campaign that was aggressively promoted by Sawant and Socialist Alternative gave a “left” cover for Democrats and the trade unions throughout the country, though it was of little benefit to workers. It has become a prominent component in the platform of nearly every Democratic presidential candidate, and is even on the platform of the Democratic National Committee. The \$15 Now campaign, which promotes a poverty-level wage as a “progressive” measure, has done nothing to quell the growing social inequality throughout the country.

In this year’s elections, Sawant based her entire platform on Democratic Party politics, such as the “Green New Deal” spearheaded by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, rent control, #MeToo, and identity politics. She has propped up the trade union apparatus. While she claims to be building a movement against the “billionaire class,” she fights only to build a movement that endorses initiatives that are rubber-stamped by the Democratic Party. This is why the local Democratic Party has given Sawant official endorsements, claiming that she is “the candidate in District 3 who best embodies those core values of the Democrats in Seattle and in Washington State.”

No real movement for social equality can be won through the Democratic Party, with which Socialist Alternative and Kshama Sawant are in political solidarity. Workers and youth must break away from these organizations and the two parties of the capitalist system and build a genuinely independent political movement fighting for a revolutionary socialist program.



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