

Socialist Alternative's Kshama Sawant promotes local police reform, Democratic Party politics

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With millions protesting across the US and internationally against the police murder of George Floyd, Socialist Alternative's Kshama Sawant is working to direct protests in Seattle along politically harmless channels by promoting illusions in local police reform.

On June 15, the Seattle City Council approved two bills that were put forward by Sawant on policing in the city. The bills include bans on chemical weapons, projectiles, and the use of chokeholds. This was declared a "historic victory" by Sawant since Seattle became the first city to establish the bans.

Such "reforms" have been promoted, and in some cases adopted, for decades, with no lessening of police brutality and murder. In the wake of popular protests against police violence, local Democratic Party politicians have issued various proposals for reforming the police—including the same measures that are included in Sawant's legislation.

Sawant is also calling for an elected community oversight board and the "defunding" of police by at least 50 percent, which would include "immediately shifting Seattle's non-criminal emergency call response away from police and into the purview of community organizers, social workers with public-sector, unionized, living-wage jobs."

Alongside this legislation, Sawant has promoted the anarchistic commune known as CHAZ (Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) or CHOP (Capitol Hill Occupied Protest), which was set up by protesters in a small portion of a Seattle neighborhood on June 8.

"What we've defeated here is the political establishment of this city," Sawant declared to hundreds of protesters. Sawant is now calling for the

area to remain in "community control" permanently. While she has not led CHOP, she has uncritically endorsed its politics.

CHOP is reminiscent of the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011. It is politically dominated by middle-class elements promoting illusions in reforming the police and society as a whole on a local basis and within the framework of capitalism.

City officials and Seattle Police Department Chief Carmen Best have cultivated friendly relations with some of the protest leaders, and Mayor Jenny Durkan has promised to implement some of their demands for police "accountability," while rejecting the "defunding" or abolition of the police.

While issuing criticisms of the Democratic "establishment" and calling for the resignation of Mayor Durkan due to her oversight of police violence against peaceful protesters, Sawant and Socialist Alternative insist that the Democratic Party can carry out reforms under pressure from a "popular" social movement. On this basis, Socialist Alternative has campaigned for Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020 and warmly welcomed the endorsement of Sawant by the Seattle Democratic Party last year.

In asserting that the police can be reformed on a local level within the framework of capitalism, Sawant is attempting to conceal the fundamental role of the police as an arm of the capitalist state tasked with defending the interests of the ruling class.

While Socialist Alternative at times refers to this basic class conception of the state, they suggest that the police can be reformed through applying sufficient popular pressure on the Democratic Party and even through a "progressive" struggle of police officers

themselves!

In a recent statement, Socialist Alternative directly appealed to police unions, hotbeds of far-right and fascist politics, to carry out a fight against police violence, writing: “If there are ordinary cops who really want reform and a different relationship with the communities they work in, then now is the time for them to stand up and work to push out the likes of Bob Kroll—the Trump-loving, far-right head of the police union in Minneapolis.”

They continue, “We believe in the right of the police to form unions so that they have a way to resist being used by the ruling class against working people. But that’s clearly not the role these unions are playing today.”

To suggest that police officers are just another cross-section of American society and should be considered equals to rank-and-file workers of other industries is a lie. If the police are an instrument of the ruling class to suppress the working class, why would they join hands with the working class?

Socialist Alternative’s calls for police reform are coupled with calls for social reform. Sawant has continued her latest Tax Amazon campaign, which calls for a meager 1.3 percent payroll tax on the largest businesses to fund Seattle housing projects. This will do nothing to address the current crisis, neither in Seattle nor the United States as a whole, during which unemployment is at an all-time high under the conditions of the pandemic.

Socialist Alternative is opposed to the development of a movement in the working class against the Trump administration and the entire political establishment. Its orientation, rather, is to sections of the Democratic Party and promoting token measures that will do nothing to alter the repressive role of the police.

After decades of political reaction, unending wars abroad and the further militarization of the police at home, workers and youth are being propelled into struggle. The current protests are only the beginning of a far broader and mass movement which will assume a directly working-class character.

What is needed is a revolutionary leadership. Workers, young people, and all those committed to social equality and democratic rights must reject Socialist Alternative and all those who orbit the Democratic Party and must take up the fight to impart

to the developing mass movement a conscious socialist and internationalist program and perspective.

The author recommends:

Police violence and class rule

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