

Right-wing recall campaign seeks to remove Socialist Alternative's Kshama Sawant from Seattle City Council

Kayla Costa
26 October 2020

Following a King County Superior Court ruling last month, a right-wing recall petition is now in motion to remove Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant from her position on the Seattle City Council. Though nominally “grassroots” and “independent,” the initiative was launched by the Democratic Party and has attracted the support of Republicans and far-right forces.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the right-wing campaign to remove Sawant on the basis of trumped-up charges and overturn the result of democratic elections. Notwithstanding our fundamental political differences with Socialist Alternative, we maintain that Sawant has a right to serve in the office to which she was elected twice, in 2013 and 2019.

Sections of the Democratic Party launched the politically motivated recall drive, attacking Sawant on the basis of her involvement with protests against police violence and her role in the “Tax Amazon” campaign, which resulted in the imposition of a minor payroll tax of less than 2 percent on Amazon and other major corporations.

Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man, whose fortune is based on the exploitation of low-wage labor, publicly opposed the payroll tax increase and supported Sawant’s opponent in the 2019 City Council election.

The Democratic Party’s role in the recall campaign demonstrates its right-wing and anti-socialist character, making clear the dead end of all politics based on pressuring the Democratic Party to the left, a key pillar of Socialist Alternative’s own politics.

Legal charges and recall process

The recall petition, filed by Seattle business executive and long-time Democratic Party supporter Ernest Lou, accuses Sawant of violating rules laid down by the city’s Ethics and Elections Commission. It asserts that she has used her position “in violation of the law or has recklessly undermined the safety of others, all for political theatre.”

Lou and his attorney, John McKay, base the petition on six charges, including using city resources to carry out the Tax Amazon ballot initiative, allowing the national Socialist Alternative organization to make employment decisions regarding her City Council office, leading protesters to Democratic Mayor Jenny Durkan’s private residence, letting anti-police violence demonstrators into City Hall on one occasion, and two charges related to her support for the Capitol

Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP).

“Councilmember Sawant has also not met her responsibilities of serving the Seattle citizens of her district,” the petition introduction states, “by providing them with adequate law enforcement resources to ensure they can live in peace.” This refers to her support for “defunding” the Seattle Police Department by at least 50 percent.

Judge Jim Rogers dismissed the two charges related to CHOP on the grounds that they were legally insufficient, but he allowed the petition to proceed on the basis of the other charges.

The petition must gather 10,687 signatures by March 15 from residents of Sawant’s District 3 for the recall election to be held. If the signatures are submitted and deemed valid by the King County Elections office in advance of a regularly scheduled election, the vote to recall Sawant will be added to that ballot. Otherwise, a special election will be held for District 3 voters solely on the recall.

The city of Seattle will put together a commission to oversee the process of choosing Sawant’s replacement. Based on city law, the City Council must elect a replacement councilmember within 20 days of the vacancy, reviewing applications and conducting interviews. The voters in District 3 will not have the ability to elect a replacement to fill Sawant’s seat until the official election in 2023.

The campaign to remove Sawant has been given a legal green light to proceed, while a recall campaign launched against Mayor Jenny Durkan on the grounds that she used unreasonable force against peaceful demonstrations against police violence was halted earlier this month by the State Supreme Court.

Last month, the City Council voted 7-1 to provide city funding to Sawant’s legal defense, estimated at \$75,000. While Sawant has cultivated close political relationships with so-called “progressive” Democrats such as Tammy Morales and Teresa Mosqueda, many of her right-wing Democratic Party opponents on the Council voted to fund her legal costs as well. As the *Seattle Times* wrote, Council President M. Lorena González “repeated several times that their vote was not a statement one way or the other on the recall charges, but rather a matter of following a precedent of funding the defense of elected officials.”

Attorney Dmitri Iglitzin, who is representing Sawant, said in a statement after the September 16 ruling: “We have elections in this state and in this city, and those elections are where the decision as to who is holding this office is supposed to be determined. ... This is, on its face, by any fair reading, a political screed against Councilmember Sawant.” Sawant’s legal team has announced its intent to take the case to the State Supreme Court.

Why is Sawant under attack?

The recall campaign against Sawant is an attempt to intimidate and suppress social opposition to police violence, racism and social inequality, which has been intensified by the criminally negligent response of the Trump administration, with the complicity of Democratic governors and mayors, to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Donors to Recall Sawant have been encouraged to keep donations under \$25, both to give the campaign a “grassroots” appearance and to circumvent a legal requirement that those who give more disclose their identity. Nevertheless, the core interests backing the campaign can be identified.

Ernest Lou, the principal figure leading the recall effort, supported Pete Buttigieg in the 2020 Democratic Party primary elections. In an interview on local radio station KTTH last month, Lou stated: “I am a big bleeding heart liberal, and I am not a right-wing conservative. I am far from that. I have voted Democrat every year of my life. I voted Democrat at the city, county, state and national level. If you go to my house, you see a gay pride flag in front of it because I’m a gay Asian-American.”

He told reporters from King5 News, “She [Sawant] is the leftist version of the right-wing version of Trump. She’s a cancer in Seattle.”

The recall campaign is also backed by Democrat Eagan Orion, Sawant’s opponent in last year’s mayoral race, who received heavy funding from wealthy Amazon executives in 2019. In late summer, he sent all of his former campaign supporters an e-mail newsletter encouraging signatures and donations for the recall effort. Though she hasn’t yet commented on Sawant’s situation, Mayor Durkan herself brought a proposal to the City Council to investigate Sawant on the basis of politically motivated allegations in late June. The proposal was voted down at the time.

While led and backed by the Democratic Party, the campaigners have actively sought collaboration with Republicans. Lou praises his attorney John McKay, a former US attorney under President George W. Bush. He also reached out to Seattle real estate vulture and Trump supporter Martin Selig to support the campaign by donating and sharing the campaign website with his contacts.

The right-wing character of the campaign has attracted fascistic and far-right elements. On the “Recall Kshama Sawant” Facebook page, one can view the following comments: “Good riddance to the American hating socialist,” “If she wants change why doesn’t she go work at the Red Light District in India?,” “Get that Marxist out of city government NOW!!,” “This woman should be deported,” and “Behead her.”

Socialism and the dead end of the Democratic Party

The recall campaign against Sawant provides insight into the right-wing character of the campaign of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. It coincides with Biden’s attacks on “violent” protesters, his repeated praise of the police, and his silence on the murder of left-

wing protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, by Trump supporter and vigilante Kyle Rittenhouse. Biden and the Democratic Party have likewise refused to condemn the targeted assassination, at the orders of Trump, of anti-fascist protester Michael Reinhoehl, carried out by a police squad led by federal marshals.

More recently, Biden and the Democrats have deliberately played down Trump’s stated intention of refusing to accept the results of the November election if they go against him, and his appeals to fascist supporters to take to the streets to back an election coup. They have dropped any serious opposition to the rushed confirmation of far-right judge Amy Coney Barrett, on whom Trump is counting to ensure Supreme Court ruling backing for his plans to overturn the election results.

They have said virtually nothing about the fascist plot to kidnap and murder the Democratic governors of Michigan and Virginia in the lead-up to the November 3 presidential election. The FBI and Michigan state authorities exposed the plot earlier this month and announced the indictment and arrest of 14 pro-Trump militia members. The Michigan attorney general called the plot the “tip of the iceberg.”

The Democratic Party’s actions are determined by the class it represents—the capitalist ruling class. It is a party of Wall Street, the CIA and the US military. Its primary concern throughout the Trump administration has been to suppress and dissipate popular hatred for Trump. Now, under conditions of the pandemic, mass unemployment and Trump’s drive for dictatorship, it is all the more focused on concealing the immense dangers facing the population and blocking any mass movement against Trump, for fear of a challenge to the capitalist system itself.

Despite its attempts to cover up its own history and role, Socialist Alternative is an ally of the Democratic Party. It is not a genuine socialist party. It works to channel the social opposition of workers and youth behind fraudulent “progressive” Democrats such as Bernie Sanders in order to block the emergence of an independent, socialist movement of the working class.

This, however, is the only basis for the defense of democratic rights. Democracy is incompatible with decaying capitalism. Those, like Socialist Alternative and Sawant, who promote illusions in the Democratic Party play a critical role in the political disorientation and disarming of the working class without which the ruling class cannot carry through its drive for dictatorship.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact