

# Socialist Alternative's Kshama Sawant joins the DSA: The Democratic Party politics of the pseudo-left

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Last week, Kshama Sawant, a leader of Socialist Alternative and member of the Seattle City Council, announced that she was joining the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the US. Sawant's declaration followed a December 15 statement by Socialist Alternative announcing that it would be sending a significant section of its membership into the DSA.

Sawant said that her decision was motivated by the need for "a mass working class party, a stronger labor movement, and victorious struggles in our ongoing fight against the billionaire class." She added, "In my view, to move forward we need to advance the Marxist ideas that will be necessary to win both immediate gains in the present crisis and a final victory over capitalism's exploitation and oppression."

"Because of the urgency to build a wider socialist movement," Sawant wrote, "I am now joining DSA, while remaining a member of Socialist Alternative."

The previous statement by the Socialist Alternative National Committee, "Why Socialist Alternative Members are Joining the DSA," claimed that it was directed at building "a viable alternative to the Democratic Party and its ruling class leadership." It is necessary, Socialist Alternative stated, to "rebuild a fighting and democratic labor movement, struggles against oppression, and lay the foundations for a new mass working class party in the US."

In fact, Socialist Alternative's effort to forge a closer alliance with the DSA is aimed at creating a new political trap. It takes place under conditions of an extreme and intensifying political crisis within the state apparatus, a growing radicalization among workers and youth, and the discrediting of the Democratic Party. Pseudo-left organizations in and around the Democratic Party—including both Socialist Alternative and the DSA—are working out organizational forms to block the development of a genuine socialist movement.

## Socialist Alternative, the DSA and the Democratic Party

There is a glaring contradiction in the statements of Sawant and Socialist Alternative. They claim that their aim is to build a "mass working class party" and an "alternative to the Democratic Party," while having their members join an organization that is a faction of the Democratic Party.

The DSA presently has five members in the US House of Representatives, all Democrats—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Danny Davis, Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman. The DSA representatives function as loyal members of the Democratic Party caucus. The DSA's

most prominent congressperson, Ocasio-Cortez, has voted for bills to fund the US military and intelligence apparatus.

In November, Ocasio-Cortez explained that she saw her role primarily as assisting the Democratic Party in whatever way possible, telling the *New York Times* that she had "been begging the party to let me help them for two years," citing specifically her efforts to assist right-wing Democrats who launched an attack on socialism in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election.

The political activity of the DSA in the recent period has been centered on the promotion of the Democratic Party presidential campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who, after his defeat in the primaries, served as a principal campaigner for Joe Biden.

At one point, Sawant declares that "the socialist movement in the past has unfortunately been derailed many many times by a failure to stand up against pro-establishment ideas and forces, a desire to get along with powerful 'progressive' individuals, a lack of clarity about Marxist ideas, and by the influence of careerists within our ranks."

However, the promotion of the fiction that socialism will be achieved through "progressive" individuals operating in the Democratic Party is at the heart of the political role played by both the DSA and Socialist Alternative itself.

On its attitude toward the Democratic Party, Socialist Alternative has no principled differences with the DSA. Its entire orientation is and has been toward bolstering the Democratic Party, while formally remaining outside of it. As for the DSA's more open role within the Democratic Party, there is no indication the DSA made any political concessions on this matter as part of Socialist Alternative's entry arrangement.

In a manner that is nearly identical to the DSA, Socialist Alternative endorsed and campaigned for Bernie Sanders in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. In 2016, it launched #Movement4Bernie, hailing Sanders' campaign as "a historic breakthrough for the US left." After losing in the primaries, Sanders backed Hillary Clinton and performed his task of directing social opposition behind the Democratic Party. In the 2020 elections, Socialist Alternative again mobilized its organization to support the Sanders campaign, claiming that he was leading a "political revolution" before he ended his campaign and backed Biden.

Last April 9, as Sanders ended his primary bid and prepared to campaign for Biden, Sawant wrote: "We have no regrets about our stand based on the enormously positive elements of the movement he helped create. Going back to 2016, Sanders electrified millions because of his radical pro-working class platform."

Most recently, in a February 1 article titled "Biden's Big Promises," Socialist Alternative member Rebecca Green suggested that the new administration might continue the Democratic Party's pro-corporate, militaristic legacy, but it could also be pressured from below to carry out

serious reforms relating to unemployment, "Medicare for All," a "Green New Deal" and other DSA-backed initiatives.

"We need real leadership," Green wrote, "and figures like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Cori Bush, Jamaal Bowman, and all the other members of the Squad will need to be unwavering in their commitment to fight for what is needed, refusing to settle for what Biden and the Democratic establishment say is acceptable, and refusing to let them whittle away their promises in the name of bipartisanship."

Both Sawant's recent statement and the previous statement by the Socialist Alternative National Committee place central emphasis on the organization's record in Seattle as an example of, as Sawant writes, using "our elected office as a lever for the working class and marginalized communities to build movements to win historic victories."

In fact, Sawant has worked closely with the Democratic Party in Seattle throughout her tenure on the Seattle City Council and welcomed the endorsement of local Democrats in 2019. Even though her mild reformist proposals have prompted harsh attacks and an active recall campaign by Democratic Party politicians, Socialist Alternative continuously orients itself towards the "left wing" of the Democrats.

### **Socialist Alternative and the call for a "new" working class party**

In its maneuver to establish closer relations with the DSA, Socialist Alternative is arguing that it can provide assistance in maintaining the political domination of the Democratic Party, whether this is done formally within the Democratic Party or outside of it.

Sawant indicates the real concern of Socialist Alternative—and of the Democratic Party—when she writes: "If socialists don't put forward clear strategies and tactics, and instead the Squad and other leaders continue to hesitate to go head-to-head with the Democratic Party to avoid a clash, we will lose. If socialists don't build powerful and fearless movements for a federal \$15 minimum wage, Medicare for All, and a Green New Deal, the working class will look elsewhere for leadership."

That is, if the DSA, Socialist Alternative and other pseudo-left organizations around the Democratic Party do not succeed in creating a political trap, the working class will turn to revolutionary politics, and, in particular, the Socialist Equality Party.

The "new" organization that Socialist Alternative has in mind is one that is entirely beholden to the Democratic Party and, indeed, initiated by it.

In June of last year, Socialist Alternative published a statement ("Blazing the Path for a New Left Party," by Bryan Koulouris and Ginger Jetzen) that lays out the character of the organization it is proposing to create in alliance with the DSA.

The statement calls for an alliance between sections of the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus with various "left" groups, including the DSA and the Movement for a Peoples Party (MPP). "Unlike some small groups [a reference to the Socialist Equality Party], we do not think that the socialist left with less than 100,000 activists in a country of over 330 million people can launch a new mass left party by ourselves," they write. They propose, instead, a coalition with various groups "in pulling together a critical mass, including the labor movement, to support the call for a mass left party." Those involved in this project would include "like-minded activists in the DSA, the Greens, the Vermont Progressive Party, the California Progressive Alliance, and MPP."

As they envision it, the role of Socialist Alternative would be to function as a left faction within this broader "mass party." They write: "While Socialist Alternative would advocate that a new mass working class party adopt a clearly anti-capitalist and class struggle approach, there would be

contending ideas and strategy in a broad formation. Some would likely advocate a focus just on elections and reforming the system without raising the need for socialism. In order to test out these ideas in a living struggle, a new left party would need democratic structures with the right of all different trends of thought to organize in favor of their ideas."

The model that Socialist Alternative has in mind is SYRIZA, the "Coalition of the Radical Left," which came to power in Greece in 2015. The article by Koulouris and Jetzen acknowledges the actual outcome of the election of SYRIZA, noting that it "ended up betraying the Greek working class, giving in to the dictates of the big banks, implementing a brutal austerity program."

At the time of SYRIZA's election, Socialist Alternative's Greek affiliate, Xekinima, promoted the fiction that the coming to power of SYRIZA marked a historical turning point and that the organization could be "pushed to the left" under the pressure of the mass movement.

Anticipating the criticism that what Socialist Alternative is proposing will play the same role as SYRIZA, Koulouris and Jetzen write, "In order to avoid the fate of SYRIZA and the defeats and misery its leadership helped inflict on the working class, a new left party would need a clear socialist program and a tested Marxist leadership."

But Socialist Alternative is proposing nothing of the sort. Indeed, Koulouris and Jetzen previously explained that what they are advocating is not a party with a socialist program and Marxist leadership, but a "broad formation" with various pro-capitalist tendencies, in which they would function as a loyal component. In her own statement, Sawant stresses that what she is proposing is "a much broader organization of the working class beyond the socialist left."

While proposing the creation of a party outside of the Democratic Party, Socialist Alternative's entire orientation is to forces in the Democratic Party that it hopes will take the initiative in creating this new party.

"One question that is often asked is where the forces for this new party will come from," Socialist Alternative member Tom Crean wrote on November 9. "Our answer is that there is a massive potential pool of support from those who supported Sanders' campaigns, progressive trade unionists, and young people active in the fight against racism, sexism and climate catastrophes."

Crean stresses that for such a party to come into being, however, "it will require significant figures and organizations to launch it." That is, it will be launched by the Democratic Party itself, along with a faction of the trade union apparatus.

The left in the US has prominent figures like Sanders, AOC and the newly-elected Cori Bush, Congressperson from Missouri. We need them to hear from their supporters who have drawn the conclusion that the Democratic Party can't be reformed. We applaud figures like Cornel West, Nina Turner—president of Our Revolution—and RoseAnn DeMoro—former president of National Nurses United—who are already moving in this direction. We need the Democratic Socialists of America, which has grown to 70,000 members in recent years and has formally committed itself to supporting the formation of a workers party, to actually make this effort a priority.

In other words, Socialist Alternative is calling on Democratic Party politicians to build a party that is ostensibly opposed to the Democratic Party. All the figures cited by Socialist Alternative—Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, Bush, West, Turner and DeMoro—are longtime operatives within the Democratic Party, and all called for a vote for Biden in the 2020 election.

Turner, a member of the Democratic Party National Convention

Committee in 2020, and West are among those who have pushed the call for a “Movement for a People’s Party,” spearheaded by Nick Brana, a founding member of the Sanders’ “Our Revolution” organization.

At the time of the “People’s Convention” to launch the MPP last August, the WSWS noted that Turner “expressed the basic political orientation of the MPP when she said prior to the event that ‘there are some progressives who want to ‘#DemExit’ but there are some progressives who believe, ‘It’s my party, I can cry if I want to and I’m going to stay inside and push.’ These two perspectives ‘are parallel and the end is the same,’ she said. In other words, both those who are participating in the MPP, as well as those who are committed to formally staying in the Democratic Party, share the same strategy and perspective.”

One could say the same about Socialist Alternative’s proposal for an alliance with the DSA.

### **The capitalist politics of the International Socialist Alternative**

Socialist Alternative’s entry into the DSA is part of a broader strategy being pursued by the International Socialist Alternative [ISA, formerly the Committee for a Workers International (CWI)], an “international” that facilitates the collaboration of national organizations with whatever “left” movement exists within their country.

The December, 2020 Socialist Alternative National Committee statement refers to the maneuvers of ISA’s national sections in other countries. “Across the world, we’ve helped to build wider new left formations while openly and honestly putting forward our own Marxist politics,” it states. The examples it cites include the Brazilian *Liberdade*, *Socialismo e Revolução* (Freedom, Socialism and Revolution--LSR) and the German *Sozialistische Alternative* (Socialist Alternative--SAV).

The predecessors of the LSR helped found the *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* (Socialism and Liberty Party--PSOL), a pseudo-left coalition formed after members of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) were expelled in 2003. The PSOL is a broad organization containing within it many pseudo-left tendencies, including the LSR, *Esquerda Marxista* -- affiliated with the International Marxist Tendency -- the *Morenoite Resistência* and at least five other *Pabloite* and *Morenoite* factions. All of them share the common function of channeling disillusionment with the PT back into the framework of capitalist politics.

Every one of these tendencies promoted the PT as the voice of the working class prior to the 2002 presidential elections, but the implementation of right-wing austerity policies by Lula Da Silva generated deep hostility in the working class, requiring PSOL and its fellow travelers to create a new organization that would essentially play the role of an external “left wing” of the PT.

The real character of the PSOL is made clear by its recent election campaign, in which it stood at least 26 military or police candidates in municipal elections nationwide, running on a platform of nationalism, militarism and cooperation with capitalist politicians. Guilherme Boulos, the PSOL mayoral candidate in Sao Paulo, even stated his intention to hire 2,000 more cops at a meeting with the Sao Paulo police union. Despite this platform, the entirety of the pseudo-left praised his campaign, including the LSR and the DSA-affiliated publication *Jacobin*.

The German SAV has seen its role as aiding the Left Party (Die Linke), which was formed in 2007 through a merger of ex-Stalinists and Social Democrats. In 2010, leading SAV figures were allowed into the Left Party as full members, after seeking to join for two years prior. At the time of their entry, members stated, “We entered the party because we are convinced that the Left Party will play an important role in showing a socialist way forward and politically strengthen the resistance to the

German government and employers in the course of the deepest capitalist crisis in decades.”

While the SAV argues that it is pushing the Left Party to build a genuine revolutionary party, the Left Party has established itself as trusted defenders of German imperialism and capitalism. It backed the corporate bailouts in both 2008 and 2020, supported the European Union, imposed austerity packages in Berlin where it has held power, and endorsed the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip. Recently, the Left Party provided its full support to NATO and German war plans as part of its preparations for joining a potential federal coalition with the Green Party and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and the deadly response of the European ruling class, the Left Party backed the return-to-work policies in May, which allowed corporations to herd workers back into unsafe conditions to resume the generation of private profit.

The perspective of International Socialist Alternative was summed up in the ISA’s World Perspectives Document from February 2020, the first published since the split in the Committee for a Workers International in 2019. The international leadership writes: “New left formations and figures will face enormous pressure to bend to the will of the ruling class the closer they get to governmental power. They can also face enormous pressure from below to go further than they intend.”

“It will require a clear revolutionary leadership with authority in the working class to overcome this contradiction,” the document continues, referring to themselves. “This clarifies the central task that we have in our epoch: to build our forces. At the same time we take part in rebuilding the workers’ movement, the unions, the union left and new Left parties.”

As the role of the ISA groups throughout the world demonstrates, “to overcome this contradiction” means, in fact, to liquidate themselves into whatever bourgeois “left” formation is established to contain popular anger and opposition.

### **Conclusion**

The reactionary role of the contemporary ISA sections directly flows from its historical origins and development. Ted Grant, who helped found the CWI in 1974, developed his positions in opposition to the fundamental principles of the Fourth International and in alignment with an opportunist tendency known as *Pabloism*. As the framework of bourgeois politics has shifted ever further to the right, pseudo-left groups like the CWI-Socialist Alternative tendency have shifted with it. They position themselves as a “left” flank of a right-wing political apparatus.

Now, in its move to forge a closer relationship with the DSA, Socialist Alternative is responding to the unprecedented political crisis in the United States.

The coronavirus pandemic has comprehensively exposed the reality of capitalism. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic has led to more than 500,000 deaths in the US alone. While the pandemic has been used to orchestrate an unprecedented bailout of the rich, tens of millions of people are unemployed and face poverty, hunger and eviction.

Already before the pandemic there was a broad-based political radicalization of workers and young people. Polls have consistently shown growing support for socialism and opposition to capitalism and the two capitalist parties.

The ruling class is responding with a further turn to the right and the preparation of authoritarian forms of rule. Former President Donald Trump incited and led a fascist coup on January 6 in an attempt to overturn the results of the election and effectively establish a presidential dictatorship. While the mob did not succeed this time, it had support from

high levels of the federal police, among military personnel and a significant portion of the Republican Party.

Downplaying the January 6 events and defending the Republican Party, Biden now presides over a right-wing administration of austerity, war and the continuation of Trump's deadly COVID-19 policies. The effort by Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA to promote the fiction that the Democrats are an agent of social reform and that a Biden administration can be pushed to the left have been exposed in the first weeks of the new government.

The two-party system, which has served for nearly 200 years in various stages to contain the class struggle, is in extreme crisis.

Under these conditions, the ruling class needs to prepare new traps. That is what the calls for a "new party" are. Socialist Alternative's entry into the DSA is an attempt to facilitate the drawing together of all the forces they hope will constitute this new trap. They represent affluent sections of the middle class rushing to fill up the cracks in the dam of bourgeois politics, for which they hope to be remunerated in the form of seats in Congress and local government, access to resources, and positions in the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus.

Their argument is: social opposition is inevitable in the working class. It will crash over the two parties like a tidal wave. Before this happens, we must build a new "left" party that is as big as possible so that when the wave comes, we will be there to catch it. Otherwise, workers will turn, God forbid, to the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International!



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