

# After one year of the right-wing campaign, recall election concluding against Seattle Councilwoman Kshama Sawant

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On December 7, mail-in ballots are due for a recall election of Seattle City Councilwoman Kshama Sawant, who represents District 3. Sawant is a leading member of Socialist Alternative who has served on the Seattle City Council since she was first elected in 2013.

The recall effort began in September 2020 when Seattle business executive and longtime Democrat Ernest Lou filed a petition accusing Sawant of violating some of the city's Ethics and Elections Commission rules. Supported by sections of the Democratic Party, the building trades unions, and far-right Republicans, the recall effort aims to oust her from her democratically elected position because of her support for mild corporate taxes and the mass demonstrations that erupted after the police murder of George Floyd.

Out of six initial charges included in Lou's petition, three have been confirmed as legally sufficient for a recall election by the King County Superior Court and Washington State Supreme Court: "misfeasance, malfeasance and violation of the oath of office." They include using city resources to carry out the Tax Amazon ballot initiative before authorization, violating COVID-19 restrictions last summer when she let anti-police violence demonstrators into City Hall, and leading protesters to Democratic Mayor Jenny Durkan's home.

Other charges regarding the national Socialist Alternative organization making employment decisions for her City Council office and two related to her support for the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) were dropped due to lack of legal sufficiency.

The charges are politically motivated. Seattle politicians have provided tax handouts to the richest corporations while enforcing dangerous COVID-19 conditions and poverty wages over the past several years. Sawant, however, is being targeted for her involvement with popular anti-police violence protests and a meager proposal for a payroll tax on Amazon's Seattle headquarters.

To give a sense of how minor the charges are in a legal and political sense, Sawant admitted earlier this year to using at least \$1,759 in city resources for the Tax Amazon ballot initiative weeks before it was officially registered with the city. She was under the impression that this was completely within her rights and was in the process of filing the initiative, which would have allowed her to use the funds anyway. She settled with the Seattle

Ethics and Elections Commission with a payment of double what she spent at the time.

There are about 76,000 residents in District 3, which comprises a significant section of central and downtown Seattle, including the Central District and Capitol Hill. The Recall Sawant campaign turned in over 13,000 signatures supporting the election, which is 3,000 more than they were required to submit by mid-October. Sawant's team alleged that the recall campaign purposefully waited to submit the signatures so that the vote would not be included in the November general elections, in which voter turnout would have been higher than special elections.

If the recall passes, Sawant will be removed from office on December 17. The City Council would appoint a temporary replacement within 20 days. Seattle residents would not have the opportunity to elect a replacement until the general elections next November, highlighting the antidemocratic nature of the recall effort.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated at the beginning of the recall process: "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."

The right-wing motivations of the Recall Sawant campaign are obvious when one examines the social composition of its supporters. Individual endorsements include real estate agents, large landlords, investors, business executives, doctors, and other upper-middle-class layers who largely occupy the wealthier northeast region of the district and other parts of the city. While there are certainly Trump donors like George Petrie and Martin Selig in the mix, many of the recall supporters are affiliated with the right wing of the Democratic Party. The recall petition filer Ernest Lou described himself as a "big bleeding heart liberal."

Sawant has also received backlash from "social justice" circles. Last week, seventy "religious and BIPOC" leaders in business and nonprofit associations wrote a public letter endorsing the Recall Sawant campaign, deploying identity politics to assert Sawant is racist. "Sawant regularly trades in rhetoric that gives rise to antisemitism, resulting in violence and hatred directed at the Jewish community," the letter stated, making a wild accusation

presumably based on Sawant's defense of Palestinians.

The letter proceeds, "She has also stoked chaos in the Black community and sought to hijack the efforts of Black Lives Matter organizers to promote her own political agenda. These behaviors have been well documented by news coverage and amount to a record that we simply cannot condone or support." Rev. Dr. Harriett Walden, a longtime black resident of Seattle who leads a reformist group Mothers for Police Accountability, was among the letter signatories and is listed at the top of the Recall Sawant endorsement page.

In alignment with these forces, the Seattle Building and Construction Trade Council (SBCTC) endorsed the recall campaign in June. The Council includes 19 local unions covering 15,000 workers across the area, including the Ironworkers Local 86, which previously supported Sawant in 2013-2014. In their announcement, the unions called Sawant "divisive and self-aggrandizing."

While not affiliated directly with the SBCTC, former NWCU Executive Secretary-Treasurer Evelyn Shapiro and former MLK Labor Council executive Nicole Grant denounced "Marxist extremists" like Sawant for wreaking "havoc" in the union during the September carpenters strike in the Seattle region. The MLK Labor Council endorsed another Democrat, Zachary DeWolf, in the 2019 primaries, despite previous support for Sawant in 2015.

Throughout the entire recall campaign, Kshama Sawant and Socialist Alternative have been incapable of calling out the Democratic Party and union executives for their active participation in this right-wing effort. On the Kshama Solidarity website, they explain that "big business is teaming up with the right wing to try to remove Kshama from office," referring solely to Trump-affiliated elements and Republicans.

The only time the Democratic Party is mentioned is in Sawant's list of endorsements, including the 43rd District Democratic Party in Seattle, which supported her in the 2019 election. She has also received the support of King County Councilmember Girmay Zahilay, Washington State Senator Rebecca Saldaña, Former State Representative Dawn Mason, and Noam Chomsky.

Likewise, Sawant refuses to expose the anti-working class and anticommunist character of the building trades unions. She supported "sisters" Shapiro and Grant throughout the carpenters' strike, calling them to come to the "table" to talk with her even as the unions were consciously plotting to sabotage the strike, force through the fifth tentative agreement, and provide more fodder for the recall campaign.

Ignoring these basic facts, Sawant focuses on the far larger number of unions that continue to support her. Endorsements have come from the International President of Association of Flight Attendants Sara Nelson, the Seattle Education Association, and locals with the UFCW, UAW, Teamsters, AFSCME, SEIU, APWU, UNITE! Here, AFT and WFSU.

Every one of these unions and politicians supporting Sawant has enforced decades of real wage cuts, deteriorating living conditions, and now the deadly conditions for workers to get infected with COVID-19. They are enmeshed within the same Democratic Party that actively collaborates with the far-right Republicans in the name of "national unity" while opposing any social reform

measure or strategy to effectively combat the pandemic. They defend corporate profits at the expense of workers' lives and livelihoods.

The fact that Sawant receives and embraces their support is bound up with her own role in providing a left cover for the Democratic Party and unions, trying to prevent disillusioned workers and youth from breaking with these organizations to pursue an independent path. Her base of support lies in the upper-middle-class trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Socialists of America, a section of the Democratic Party.

Sawant and Socialist Alternative cannot wage a genuine defense of themselves, calling out the real forces behind the campaign, because doing so would expose their whole perspective that the Democratic Party is a vehicle for progressive change under "pressure from below."

In reality, the Democratic Party and American political establishment as a whole are responding to the resurgence of the class struggle and left-wing sentiments by moving to the right. While Trump and the fascist elements around him continue their operations unrestrained, Biden and other Democrats have adopted a right-wing platform based on "law and order," support of the police and military, dropping COVID-19 restrictions and protecting Wall Street at all costs.

This rightward trend within ruling-class politics is finding reflection in Seattle, with the recall election and the recent defeat of "progressive" Democrats Nikkita Oliver and Lorena González in November's local elections to more conservative Democrats like incoming Mayor Bruce Harrell.

Contrary to the perspective of Sawant, combatting the right-wing character of American politics and the threat of fascism requires the development of a political movement of the working class, independent of the Democratic Party and the trade unions.



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