

What is behind Socialist Alternative and Kshama Sawant's latest non-socialist initiative?

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Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant has announced that she will not seek re-election for the city council of Seattle, Washington and will instead form a “new movement,” called Workers Strike Back, to “rebuild the class struggle in America.” Sawant explained the decision in an op-ed published in the local Seattle publication, *The Stranger*, on January 19.

This marks a sudden change of course for Socialist Alternative and Sawant, who has served on the Seattle City Council for just short of a decade. Sawant was first elected in 2013, was re-elected twice, and defeated a right-wing recall effort in 2021. At the time of her inauguration in January 2014, she presented her election as having “made waves around the world” and pledged to use her position to help build “a new political party, a mass organization of the working class run by—and accountable to—theirelves.” Her present term will expire in January 2024.

Sawant’s letter presents the Workers Strike Back initiative as the national extension of her time in office. As a member of Seattle’s city council, she writes that working people achieved “historic victories” which “set a powerful example that has had a national and even international impact.” In office, Sawant writes, “we have prevailed again and again. This is the most important lesson from our example of socialist politics in Seattle. That when workers and young people get organized and fight, we can win.” Among the victories she cites are the passage of a modest city tax on Amazon and the enactment of a \$15/hour minimum wage law.

In her announcement, Sawant focuses on juxtaposing her political record to those of “other elected officials in this country,” namely members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who are “failing to stand up to the political establishment.”

Responding to growing left-wing opposition to the DSA, she writes, “Just last month we saw the historic and shameful betrayal of railroad workers by members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, including caucus chair Pramila Jayapal and self-proclaimed democratic socialist ‘Squad’ members such as AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez].”

Sawant writes that “working people and the left cannot stand by and wait on so-called progressive elected officials. We cannot put our faith in the AOCs or the Pramila Jayapals” and that “the organization that should be holding AOC and the Squad accountable, the Democratic Socialists of America, appears to be unwilling to do so. It gives me no pleasure to say this, because I am currently a member of DSA. But the DSA leadership has, for the most part, provided cover for the misleadership of the squad.”

Sawant’s new initiative comes amid a rising wave of strikes and social protests. Under these conditions, Sawant worries that there is “a vacuum of real left leadership, locally and national.”

The purpose of Workers Strike Back is to fill this vacuum, which Sawant defines with left-sounding language, calling it “a nationwide

movement—an independent, rank-and-file campaign organizing in workplaces and on the streets.” She says: “The task of rebuilding the class struggle in America will go nowhere if young people and the rank-and-file of the labor movement are not clear about the role of the Democratic Party.”

An appraisal of Sawant and Socialist Alternative’s role shows they have already systematically violated every principle upon which they claim their “new movement” will be built.

Kshama Sawant: A political balance sheet

Sawant and Socialist Alternative are not opponents of the Democratic Party. They have operated in a de facto alliance with a section of the Democrats for years, promoting the very same “progressive” Democrats she now claims cannot be trusted. It is certainly true that the building of a socialist movement must be “clear about the role of the Democratic Party,” but Sawant and Socialist Alternative have spent years promoting illusions in the Democratic Party.

This was already evident in 2013, when Sawant first won office. At that time, an organization called “Democrats for Sawant” was created to promote her campaign. Sawant now claims “we cannot put our faith in the AOCs or Pramila Jayapals,” but that is exactly what Sawant has told her supporters to do for many years. In 2015, Jayapal endorsed Sawant when the former was a Democratic state senator (she is now a congressperson and leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus). Upon winning Jayapal’s endorsement, Sawant said it was proof that career Democratic Party politicians can be won to socialism:

What this shows more than anything else is the fact that a lot of the people who identify themselves as Democratic Party members or politicians or activists are actually looking for the kind of fight that I have waged in Seattle.

Over the years, Sawant has boasted about the endorsements of official Democratic Party groups and various Democratic officials. In February 2015, Sawant attended a fundraiser for Democratic Party county official Larry Gossett weeks after he voted to build a \$200 million youth prison. Socialist Alternative defended the move: “We should fight to win the support of Democratic politicians for demands that advance the interests of working people,” adding, “It’s these people” who “we need to work

closely with” and “convince” and “encourage” to pressure the “establishment.”

In 2018, when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was elected to Congress, Sawant rushed to promote illusions in the New York DSA member as a model for change. In a letter to Ocasio-Cortez, Sawant wrote, “I am writing to congratulate you, and other newly elected socialists, on your elections... To those who campaigned for you I also offer my congratulations, including to members of Democratic Socialists of America, who along with my organization, Socialist Alternative, helped bring your fight to hundreds of thousands of working people.”

Sawant downplayed concerns over the fact that Ocasio-Cortez ran as a Democrat, saying, “despite these differences we believe we can and should work together to build a sustained movement with democratic structures to win the working class demands on which you campaigned.”

Amid the mass demonstrations against the police killing of George Floyd in 2020, Sawant and Socialist Alternative appealed to the Democratic Party to pressure the Seattle police to “reform” themselves. Socialist Alternative wrote, “If there are ordinary cops who really want reform... then now is the time to stand up,” adding, “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.”

Even after the Democratic Party’s anti-democratic, failed attempt to recall her in 2021, Sawant continued to promote the “progressive” bona fides of a wing of the Democratic-controlled city council, writing, “I strongly urge that they and our socialist office act in unity as the City Council’s progressive wing.”

Moreover, Socialist Alternative essentially transformed itself into an organization for the election of Democratic Party presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in both 2016 and 2020. It promoted Sanders’ fraudulent claim to be leading a “political revolution,” which translated in both elections into backing the establishment Democratic Party candidate, while Sanders himself has been elevated into the leadership of the Democratic Party caucus in the Senate.

In other words, when Sawant and Socialist Alternative say all movements oriented to the Democratic Party “go nowhere,” they inadvertently summarize both their political past and future trajectory.

Sawant and Socialist Alternative’s promotion of the DSA

In her letter announcing the formation of Workers Strike Back, Sawant criticizes the DSA for voting to illegalize the railroad strike. She denounces the DSA for “betraying” the working class and “providing cover for the misleadership of the Squad.”

Sawant calls these realities “unfortunate,” and even this choice of words is aimed at obfuscating the DSA’s class essence. The DSA’s vote to illegalize the railroad strike is not some unfortunate accident that could have been avoided with better “leadership.” On the contrary, it was an expression of the organization’s longstanding role as a faction of the Democratic Party, which is irreconcilably hostile to the working class and eviscerates workers’ basic rights to secure corporate profits.

Notably, Sawant makes no mention of the DSA’s vote to fund the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, helping to cover the DSA members’ attempt to put a “left” face on American imperialism. Sawant’s longstanding support for Jayapal is partly responsible for the latter’s ascension as head of the Progressive Caucus, which rescinded its mild call for negotiations to end the war and instead called for escalating the war to the brink of nuclear catastrophe.

Sawant and Socialist Alternative have themselves spent the last two years providing political support for the DSA by falsely presenting it as a

genuine socialist organization. Sawant makes no attempt to answer the obvious question: If the DSA has exposed itself as a part of the political establishment and an enemy of the working class, what does it say about Socialist Alternative’s decision to have its members join it?

The decision by Sawant and other Socialist Alternative members to join the DSA was presented as the organization’s last major initiative, announced with the same level of fanfare as the launching of Workers Strike Back.

In December 2020, Sawant expended substantial political capital campaigning for entry into the DSA: “Because of the urgency to build a wider socialist movement, I am now joining DSA, while remaining a member of Socialist Alternative.”

Socialist Alternative’s National Committee published a statement claiming the move was aimed at building “a viable alternative to the Democratic Party and its ruling class leadership.” Joining the DSA was necessary, Socialist Alternative wrote, in order 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.”

Socialist Alternative’s National Committee held up the DSA as the path for the building of a socialist movement on the basis of the most pragmatic numeric calculations, adding, “DSA has grown dramatically, and a new generation of socialist activists have changed DSA for the better. Socialist Alternative has always been excited by DSA’s growth despite our political differences with some of DSA’s leading voices.”

In this way, Socialist Alternative and Kshama Sawant presented the DSA as capable of leading the fight for a “mass working class party,” and stated that their aim was to recruit new members into the DSA. In so doing, they only legitimized the Democratic Party’s efforts to use the DSA to trap social opposition and thereby rendered crucial political support to the capitalist class.

With DSA in crisis, Sawant and Socialist Alternative prepare a new trap

While it is now trying to distance itself from the DSA, Socialist Alternative joined the DSA because it has always been oriented to the Democratic Party, and because the DSA is the Democratic Party. The exposure of the DSA therefore is also an exposure of Socialist Alternative.

Under these conditions, Socialist Alternative’s decision to launch a sudden new initiative is a tardy attempt to rinse off the mud from rolling around the Democratic Party pigsty. Its aim is also to avoid any political discussion of its disastrous policy by rushing its membership from one pragmatic activist exercise to the next.

This instability, which is rooted in the lack of political agreement between its members that characterizes all middle class organizations, also finds expression in the increasing reliance on the individual personality of Kshama Sawant.

Workers Strike Back’s social media posts inordinately focus on her image, and it was significant that the change to Socialist Alternative’s activity was announced not by the organization in its party publication, but by Sawant in a local newspaper. Sawant’s announcement also stated that she will be personally hosting a regular “video broadcast” beginning this summer. Two weeks after Sawant’s announcement, Socialist Alternative has not even posted a national committee statement endorsing the decision, though it did so in 2020 when Sawant and others joined the DSA.

The “program” of Workers Strike Back

The program of Workers Strike Back is, on its face, a non-socialist program consistent with the platitudes of most Democratic primary challengers, albeit with more radical language. Sawant describes Workers Strike Back’s initial demands as fighting for a “real raise,” “good union jobs for all,” “quality affordable housing and free healthcare for all,” “no more sell outs,” and a “fight racism, sexism, and all oppression.” The organization’s website lists five longer demands that contain no references to “socialism,” “imperialism,” “war” or “COVID.” It concludes with a call for building a “new party” that is careful to avoid using the word “socialism”:

We need a new, multiracial, working-class party that organizes movements and fights unambiguously for our needs. In such a party, all elected leaders would accept only the average workers’ wage, like Seattle Councilmember Kshama Sawant. We would need elected leaders to be fully accountable to our membership and our demands, or else be removed. Under capitalism, the bosses call the shots and have a dictatorship over our workplaces. We need workers’ democracy and a different kind of society.

The non-socialist “new party” which Sawant and Socialist Alternative are calling for is based on the model set by the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), a similar broad coalition “left” party which enforced ruthless austerity measures at the behest of the European banks in 2015 and carried out brutal attacks on immigrants.

In this case, Socialist Alternative’s orientation is particularly to mid-level union bureaucrats, who already make up a significant part of its membership and who are aware that the trade union bureaucracies are viewed as illegitimate and are unprepared to handle the emerging explosion of the class struggle. For this reason, Sawant’s statement refers to the need to unite “progressive labor unions,” and says her model for Workers Strike Back is the UK-based “Enough Is Enough” campaign, set up by the trade unions to better control growing discontent over the rising cost of living.

The United States, as Sawant’s statement acknowledges, is a social powder keg, with strikes and protests increasing. The DSA is in crisis, losing thousands of members as entire branches and groups become defunct as a result of a growing realization that the organization is nothing but a faction of the Democratic Party. Socialist Alternative is fighting to position itself as the next catchment area for social opposition.

It is most revealing that Sawant’s statement refers to “a vacuum of real left leadership, locally and national.” Sawant and Socialist Alternative are highly conscious that the DSA is losing its ability to trap social opposition from breaking out of the Democratic Party. The ruling class needs such traps to crush the class struggle and block opposition to their imperialist geostrategic designs.

Many socialist-minded workers and youth have passed through an important experience with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and are looking for a real way to fight for socialist revolution. The purpose of Workers Strike Back is to create a new trap, in alliance with sections of the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies, to block the growth of a genuine socialist movement independent of the two parties.

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