

# The bankrupt politics of Socialist Alternative's Workers Strike Back campaign in New York: "Frighten the Democrats to respond"

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Earlier this month, Socialist Alternative held a public meeting at the Borough of Manhattan Community College for the "New York City launch" of its Workers Strike Back (WSB) campaign.

The event featured a panel discussion, which included Socialist Alternative leader Kshama Sawant, journalist Chris Hedges and former Bernie Sanders press secretary Briahna Joy Gray. The meeting also took contributions from former Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader and a representative of the Morenoite publication *Left Voice*.

The announcement of the Workers Strike Back initiative marked an abrupt shift from the electoral work Sawant and Socialist Alternative were engaged in during her tenure as a member of the Seattle City Council. During the last two years, Socialist Alternative has attempted to transform the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which is a faction of the Democratic Party, from within. This was aimed, they claimed, at creating "a viable alternative to the Democratic Party" and rebuilding "a fighting and democratic labor movement, struggles against oppression, and lay the foundations for a new mass working class party in the US." The DSA has subsequently exposed itself as a supporter of the US-NATO war against Russia, and its members in Congress voted to illegalize a potential railroad strike last December.

The WSWS previously wrote about the formation of WSB, "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."

WSB, as Socialist Alternative has stressed, is a "non-socialist" initiative. This is proven by the decidedly anti-socialist figures with whom Socialist Alternative associated at the WSB event in New York.

Chris Hedges, for example, has spent the beginning part of the year campaigning for an alliance between the political left and the right. He was the opening speaker at the reactionary "Rage Against the War Machine" rally and defended his position to join it by writing: "We will not topple corporate power and the war machine alone. There has to be a left-right coalition, which will include people whose opinions are not only unpalatable but even repugnant, or we will remain marginalized and ineffectual. This is a fact of political life."

Ralph Nader was the first speaker at the WSB event and made explicit the group's orientation to "elected officials"—that is, the Democratic Party. "For broad reform, where do we have to go? It's either Congress and state legislatures or local city council," Nader said. "So what you want to do is demonstrate in front of the local office of your senators and representatives. That sends a message back to Washington. They see the workers have a pulse. They see the workers are going to connect it with

voting in November. Always connect all your effort to focus for the longer term on changing the Congress and the state and local legislators."

In the panel discussion, Sawant said, "It's not working with the Democrats and Republicans," and that what was needed is "real militant fighting kind of strategies." "What's missing is political leadership to make some sort of change. That's where WSB comes in. That's where all the work that we have done in the nearly 10 years that we've had the office in Seattle and Socialist Alternative comes in."

However, Sawant and Socialist Alternative have not spent this time building socialist "political leadership" but promoting illusions in the Democratic Party and supporting the very same "progressive" Democrats she now denounces as betrayers of the working class. Sawant was regularly endorsed by Democratic Party groups, and in the last years Socialist Alternative has transformed itself into an election campaign team for Bernie Sanders in both 2016 and 2020. It has also lent support to congresspersons like the DSA's Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and House Progressive Caucus leader Pramila Jayapal.

The panelists at the WSB event also discussed the crisis of legitimacy confronting the trade union bureaucracies.

Hedges stated, "This movement ... is not just confronting a system that's gamed against us through the two-party duopoly, but it's also confronting a union leadership that has become junior partners in the capitalist system."

Joy Gray asked about the issues surrounding union leadership and how to make unions more effective so that they "aren't self-defeating because the leadership is co-opted."

Sawant spoke of the prevalence of "business unionism" in the labor movement. "We hear about frustrated workers who don't want to be in a union anymore. ... [we] really need to be emphatic about the role of the union ... the union is a way for workers to be organized as one unit and build solidarity ... without it, workers are crushed. ... on that basis, there is a huge potential to win over workers."

Sawant stated the importance of reform caucuses being formed "because it shows that the union leadership is also under pressure." A recent statement on the WSB's website titled "A Rank-and-File Rebellion" focuses on the fact that workers are increasingly fighting "not only the bosses, but also their own union leadership." It continues, commenting on the rise of reform caucuses: "We need to get organized to demand that these newly-elected union [reform] leaders follow through on their promises. In some cases, however, the leaders of these caucuses are promoting a watered-down form of business unionism."

While admitting that the corporatized trade unions have become discredited in the eyes of workers and that a rank-and-file rebellion is

currently taking place against the union bureaucracy, the WSB campaign is only serving to redirect this anger back into promoting illusions that it is possible to make the union bureaucracies fight. This is a dead-end trap for rank-and-file workers looking for a way to fight back. Instead of breaking workers from the union apparatus and encouraging the rank-and-file rebellion, WSB is only helping the bureaucracies prepare to trap and harness the emerging rebellion.

There is a long history of failed union reform movements over the last half-century which Socialist Alternative ignores. American trade unions today, led by the AFL-CIO, function as a critical instrument for the suppression of the class struggle while promoting US imperialism, ensuring the working class is disciplined at home in order to pay for billions spent on war abroad.

Two such reform movements, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) in the UAW, now occupy top posts within their unions and are playing critical roles in selling out tens of thousands of UPS and auto workers. The Amazon Labor Union, which WSB promotes as “groundbreaking,” has failed to bring Amazon to the bargaining table one year after unionizing in Staten Island and currently faces an internal crisis.

Joy Gray criticized “the left” for “not being united under one ideological umbrella, the way that Bernie kind of presented to us.” She asked Hedges how to “direct people back into a leftward direction.”

Hedges said, “Any progressive, even Bernie, has no power without the power of unions. And that is the most important political tool we have in organizing the working class to *begin to put pressure on* an oligarchic system that has orchestrated social inequality—unlike anything we have seen—in the United States ... politics is not a game of compromise, politics is a game of fear. And our job is to make them very, very afraid.” [Emphasis added.]

In the course of his remarks, Hedges also heaped praise on Sawant, Nader—for whom Hedges was a speechwriter—and Cornel West. Hedges said he was meeting with the Green Party the following day to recommend West run as their candidate—which West is now doing—and raised the possibility of Sawant running with West.

In a recent statement, Socialist Alternative said that they, along with WSB, will be “taking up the fight for Cornel West’s campaign,” and that “a strong independent Cornel West campaign has the potential to help kick off a new wave of mass struggle and be a political earthquake in US politics.”

Sawant later responded to Hedges. “As Chris was saying, it’s what are they afraid of. They’re not afraid of any one individual. What they’re afraid of is an army of working people that shows up in city council chambers and exposes the rottenness of the politicians who speak from both sides of their mouth.”

Raising her experience in Seattle, Sawant said that if pressure is applied, “they are forced to vote yes on renters’ rights, which is what has happened. We won a whole host of renters’ rights victories on that basis. Ultimately, that’s the approach we need, whether we’re talking about union rights or electoral campaigns.”

The panel discussion ended with a contribution by Hedges, who said: “[Nader’s] whole argument, which I bought, was if we could get five, 10, 15 million people to stand in a third party, the Democrats will have to respond. And that’s what we have to do now. We have to hold fast to these moral imperatives to frighten. That’s the only way they’re going to respond—*frighten these systems into beginning to address the grotesque social inequality and the abuse of the working class.*” [Emphasis added.]

It must be stated emphatically: Opposing the right-wing, pro-imperialist Democratic Party is totally incompatible with attempting to pressure the Democrats into making “reform.” While Socialist Alternative and Hedges say they want to “oppose” the Democratic Party, the trade union bureaucracy and the DSA leadership, their politics are oriented towards

these same hostile forces by pressuring them to reform themselves. This only serves as a block to the leftward movement of workers and young people seeking an independent path against these class enemies.

The ruling class will not be scared into reform. Today’s Democratic Party, just like the Labour Party in Britain, responds to pressure from below by ruthlessly suppressing its “left” and appealing for unity with its “friends” in the fascistic Republican Party. There is no social constituency within the Democratic Party for reform because of the position of American imperialism. The Roosevelt administration could make certain concessions to stave off the threat of revolution because of the geopolitical dominance of American capitalism. Those days are long gone.

It is noteworthy that the word socialism was only raised once during the WSB meeting in New York, while the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine was not raised a single time nor was the pandemic. Socialist Alternative has downplayed the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, including by advocating (alongside openly pro-imperialist organizations) for the lifting of Zero-COVID policies in China.

In sharp contrast to Socialist Alternative’s initiative, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is fighting for the development of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to encourage the emerging rank-and-file rebellion.

In the founding statement in April 2021, the ICFI wrote: “For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions. ... The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale.” In addition, it added, “Sustaining and developing a network of independent organizations requires the development of a socialist leadership in the working class.”

Another key document on building the IWA-RFC states:

While the IWA-RFC is not a replacement for the revolutionary party, it is also not merely an instrument of conventional trade union struggles. Its aim is to facilitate the development of a movement out of the control of the corporate-state AFL-CIO apparatus and unleash the tremendous social power of the American working class. Trotsky wrote in “The Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay,” the party must “mobilize the masses, not only against the bourgeoisie, but also against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime.” Smashing the AFL-CIO apparatus will require nothing less than a rebellion that transfers power to the workers themselves.

A growing network of rank-and-file committees of autoworkers, railroad workers, educators, postal workers and other sections of the working class is being built and has played a critical role in strikes and the broader development of the class struggle. This is encompassed in the campaign waged by socialist autoworker Will Lehman for UAW President based on abolishing, not reforming the UAW apparatus. This is the opposite of Socialist Alternative’s futile calls to pressure the Democratic Party.



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