

# Kshama Sawant: Revolutionary rhetoric and reformist politics

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Former Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant is billing herself as an “independent revolutionary socialist” candidate for Congress. She is running for the House of Representatives from the 9th Congressional District of Washington state against the incumbent, Democratic Representative Adam Smith.

Sawant’s response to the war in Iran underscores her use of revolutionary rhetoric to disguise a nationalist and reformist perspective. She seeks to channel mass popular opposition to war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights into the dead end of bourgeois electoral politics, while promoting the illusion that pressure from below can force a section of the trade union bureaucracy to lead general strikes and wring major concessions from the ruling class.

As for the capitalist class’s turn to dictatorship and fascism, which finds its most grotesque expression in the Trump administration, Sawant has little to say. In promoting a perspective of pressuring the political establishment, Sawant ignores Trump’s open drive to rig the 2026 mid-term elections or cancel them altogether. This is despite the White House push for the voter suppression “Save America” act and plans to deploy armed federal agents or troops at polling stations.

Sawant’s March 5 interview with Steve Zeltzer on his “Work Week Radio” podcast, titled “The US-Israel War on Iran, US Imperialism, Democrats & Class War in the US,” illustrated her perspective. She, in fact, said little about the war beyond denouncing it and calling for mass opposition to it. The bulk of the interview was devoted to criticism of the “business unionism” of “most union leaders” and calls for “class struggle unionism,” along with talk of electoral “breakthroughs” such as her ten-year tenure on the Seattle City Council and her current congressional campaign.

Sawant presented no analysis of the driving forces and historical origins of the war, nor did she address its global context and significance. She had nothing to say about its illegality, in terms of both international and domestic law, or the dictatorial manner in which the Trump administration is conducting it. She said almost nothing about what is actually happening in Iran, Lebanon and the broader Middle East, which gives the US-Israeli attack the character of a war of extermination.

At one point she called the current war just another of the “routine wars, routine aggression” carried out by US imperialism.

She spent, as usual, a great deal of time recounting the supposed “historic victories” she won while on the Seattle City Council (2014-2024), including a \$15 minimum wage and the so-called “Amazon tax” on some of the largest corporations that operate in the city. The \$15 minimum wage (now at \$21.30 after provisions for inflation), the Amazon tax (between 1 percent and 2.6 percent) and certain renter protections prove, according to Sawant, that combining

protest pressure with elective office can deliver massive gains for working people.

In reality, social conditions in Seattle have only worsened since Sawant’s ascension to the City Council. The minimum wage in Seattle, calculated on an annual basis, is just under \$43,000. This is a third of the estimated \$120,000 considered to be a living wage in the city.

Homelessness, supposedly addressed by the Amazon tax, has surged in the city. The number of homeless people in Seattle was just over 11,000 in 2019. The latest estimates of the King County’s homelessness authority say that number has risen to more than 16,000 in 2026. Meanwhile, Amazon owner Jeff Bezos saw his wealth grow from about \$150 billion in 2020 to \$250 billion in 2026. Amazon’s stock has more than doubled over the same period.

In the podcast, Sawant argued that ballot initiatives sponsored by elected “socialists” were comparable to the reforms enacted in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Such electoral “breakthroughs,” accompanied by “class struggle unionism,” could extract New Deal-type reforms today, she maintained.

Leaving aside the absurd comparison of a local ballot initiative with the great class battles of the 1930s, Sawant’s argument ignores the vast economic decline of American capitalism over the past 90 years. In the 1930s, the United States was already the industrial powerhouse of the world, home of the most advanced production methods, such as the assembly line. It led the world in the production of autos, steel, and other industrial goods.

Over the past 70 years the US has lost its industrial supremacy. Capitalism in the US has been financialized and deindustrialized. It has become the global center of financial parasitism. Over this period American capitalism has been transformed from the world’s largest creditor to its largest debtor.

This has been accompanied by a massive decline in the social position of the working class in the US and a staggering growth of social inequality. Today, the US is ruled by a tiny financial oligarchy that controls the great bulk of the country’s wealth. The top 1 percent in the US (3 million people) controls 32 percent of the national wealth. The bottom 50 percent (170 million people) controls a mere 2.4 percent. The fascist ignoramus Trump embodies this oligarchy.

To talk about extracting major social reforms from American capitalism today simply through pressure from below is delusional and, quite frankly, ignorant. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has written, the fascist Trump administration represents the alignment of the political superstructure with the underlying social relations of American capitalism. Democracy cannot survive under conditions of such massive levels of social inequality.

### **Sawant's record**

Sawant's political record is that of an unprincipled gadfly, moving from one organization to another without any explanation for her shifting allegiances. Her record also demonstrates the fraudulent character of her claim to be independent of and opposed to the Democratic Party.

When she was first elected to the City Council in 2014 she was a member of Socialist Alternative, an organization that promoted Democratic Socialists of America-Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and House Progressive Caucus chair Pramila Jayapal (Democrat from Washington state). During the 2014 Israel-Gaza war, Sawant urged the City Council to condemn both Israel's attacks on the Palestinians and Hamas' defensive attacks on Israel.

In 2021, Sawant joined the DSA, which functions as a faction of the Democratic Party. She called the DSA "the most significant left organization in the United States in many decades." Two years later, in 2023, she left the DSA and launched Workers Strike Back.

In 2016, Sawant endorsed Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, with Socialist Alternative transforming itself into an electoral support group for Sanders. She switched to backing reformist Green Party candidate Jill Stein when Sanders pulled out of the race to support Hillary Clinton. In 2020 and 2024, she endorsed Stein.

Her relationship to New York Democratic Mayor Zohran Mamdani sharply exposes her political opportunism. Through most of 2025, she celebrated Mamdani's mayoral campaign as "earth-shattering," hailing Mamdani as someone "relentlessly going for his demands." She presented his membership in the DSA as proof that the Democratic Party could be pressured through "socialist victories." Now she criticizes Mamdani for meeting and partnering with Trump, without providing any accounting for her previous support for the DSA Democrat.

Sawant asserts that the problem with the labor movement in the US is the "business unionism" of "most" union leaders, and advances as the solution "rebuilding the militancy in the labor movement" in the form of "class struggle" unionism.

There is no lack of militancy in the working class. Workers are angry and want to fight. Strikes are spreading against declining real wages, speedup, and the attack on jobs—witness the nurses' strike in New York, the Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers' strike in California, strikes by educators, refinery workers and others. There is mass opposition in the working class to the war in Iran and Trump's drive to dictatorship, including the brutal assault by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents on immigrants. The role of the trade union apparatus is to betray and shut down the strikes and suppress the opposition to war and dictatorship.

### **Trotsky on the unions**

Sawant offers only a subjective explanation for the reactionary role of the union bureaucracy, i.e., bad leaders guided by bad ideas. Leon Trotsky, in his uncompleted 1940 article titled "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," explained the objective socio-economic forces behind the degeneration of the trade unions, linking it to the development of monopoly capitalism. He wrote:

There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to

and growing together with the state power... The labor bureaucrats do their level best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the "democratic" state how reliable and indispensable they are in peace time and especially in time of war. By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusions the tendencies inherent in imperialism.

Eighty-six years later, the tendencies identified by Trotsky have developed to an extraordinary degree. Over the past five decades, the union apparatus has integrated itself into corporate management. It is comprised of upper middle-class functionaries whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the workers they claim to represent.

The solution to this is not, as Sawant contends, pressuring the union apparatus to replace "business unionism" with "class struggle unionism," in order to wrest concessions from the ruling class within the framework of capitalism.

Sawant's orientation to the trade union bureaucracy was demonstrated at a February 22 campaign meeting held in the Seattle area. The event featured low-level union bureaucrats, including a member of the Peter J. McGuire caucus of the Northwest Carpenters Union. This group played a major role in corraling militant workers back behind the trade union bureaucracy during the 2021 Seattle carpenters' strike.

Sawant was in office during the carpenters' strike. She called on workers to pressure "progressive elected officials," i.e., Democratic Party politicians. She begged American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and President Joe Biden to intervene on the carpenters' behalf while the Biden administration and the educators' unions were herding educators and children back into coronavirus-infected schools. The end result of the strike was a sellout contract that fell well short of workers' demands.

The *World Socialist Web Site* rejects Sawant's claim that pressure from below can force the union bureaucracy to fight against war and in defense of the jobs, working conditions and living standards of the working class. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party fight for the building of a network of rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatus in the US and internationally to overthrow the bureaucracy and establish workers' power on the shop floor.

To this end, the International Committee of the Fourth International has established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This is the only basis for mobilizing the power of the working class in the US and globally to put an end to capitalism, the cause of war, exploitation, and dictatorship.

This requires the building of revolutionary leadership to bring socialist consciousness into the working class, something that is opposed by Sawant and the entire array of pseudo-left tendencies.

Sawant's agitation is devoid of Marxist analysis and hostile to the historically developed program of the Trotskyist movement. She is a demagogue, the worst enemy of the working class.



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