Election Victory in Seattle

written by Steve Leigh | November 15, 2019

The left and workers in general won a significant victory in Seattle on Nov. 5. Kshama Sawant, Socialist Alternative candidate for Seattle City Council won her third consecutive term against a concerted and well-funded business offensive. At the end of Sawant's new term in 2024, she will have been on the City Council for 10 years—the longest serving independent socialist candidate in recent U.S. History.

Seattle is divided into seven council districts, all of whose representatives were up for election though only were three were incumbents. There are also two city-wide positions that were not on the ballot this time. Even though the actual voting is by district, the campaign by big business against "progressive" candidates was city wide, spear-headed by two different business PACs. Of the seven seats, only two candidates backed by the business coalition succeeded—and one of those was also supported by progressives. In other words, in spite of over $4 million spent, business only won one fully contested race.

The credit for the success in the Council election goes to Socialist Alternative and the over 1,000 volunteers who knocked on over 225,000 doors and raised a half million dollars in small donations to counter the business war chest. Without this grass roots campaign, Sawant would have lost.

As with her previous campaigns, Sawant was selected for the run by Socialist Alternative and the campaign was run by that organization though many other community groups and unions gave their support. As her original primary vote shows, a campaign with all its decisions made by one political organization tends to be weaker than one where the left in general is involved in democratic decision making. In this case, the campaign was successful even without democratic decision making by the community. For the strongest possible results, future campaigns should consider this.

Background to the Campaign

In order to understand the unfolding of the campaign, it is necessary to understand the politics and economics of Seattle.

Seattle is a boom town. It has more construction cranes than virtually any other city in the U.S. The economy is fueled by a tech-boom led by Microsoft and especially Amazon , but also Google and many other companies. Housing prices have rapidly increased, so the average apartment in Seattle goes for over $2000 a month. Gentrification is widespread. Older cheaper apartments are torn down for new high rises.

Predictably, this has created a crisis of homelessness. In King County as a whole, over 12,000 people are homeless. Every rise in average rent increases the numbers living in the street. Drug addiction and crime are commonly associated with the house-less. Yet studies show that less than half have alcohol or drug addiction. The other related association is with garbage and debris from homeless camps. There is some truth to this since the city does not provide enough regular sanitation or garbage services.

Washington State has the most regressive tax structure in the U.S. The state is funded by a sales tax and a property tax that hits hardest on residences rather than commercial property. There is no state income tax. This means that the poorest pay 17% of their income in state taxes while the richest pay less than 3 %. Cities are limited in what type of taxes they can impose, which limits their

ability to address the housing crisis.

Even beyond the housing issue, racism is a major problem. Blacks are eight times as likely to be jailed in King County as whites are. The Black Lives Matter movement struck a chord here since the Seattle police have a horrific record of racism. The Seattle Police Department has even been under U.S. Justice Department supervision. Every other social issue also reflects ingrained institutional racism in Seattle from differential punishment rates in Seattle Schools to health status, unemployment, wages, life expectancy and poverty rates etc.

When the City Council tried to begin to deal with the housing crisis, last year, Amazon squelched the effort. A majority of the Council passed a modest employee hour tax that would have raised over $75 million for low income housing. Though Bezos could have paid Amazon's share by emptying one of his pants pockets on one night, Amazon and other businesses put so much pressure on the Council that the tax was reversed in less than 2 weeks. Only Sawant and one other Council member opposed the repeal. This left a stalemate. The city didn't have enough money to seriously address housing. In spite of continual repression including regular destruction of homeless camps, the homeless would not go away. Frustration grew on all sides.

How the Campaign Unfolded

Big business decided that the problem was a "too progressive" City Council that refused to deal with the crisis. Its solution was unclear but vaguely for more repression and less "coddling" of criminals . It knew that it wanted to oust many of the current Council members. Amazon, the Downtown Seattle Association and other capitalists ponied up money to back a couple PACs, including a 1 million dollar drop shortly before the election. They claimed to be the radicals—i.e., against the status quo! Sawant, the only socialist on the Council, was a special target. In the primary election, Sawant led the pack of several candidates in her district but only received 37% of the vote. This is a historically low percent for an incumbent.

The narrative during the elections was typical of American politics. Sawant was presented as "divisive" and "strident" since she regularly called out big business and other Council members. The Council as a whole was tagged with being ineffective on homelessness, transportation and "public safety."

Especially in the campaign of business representative Egan Orion against Kshama Sawant the political approach was clear. Sawant ran against Big Business and called for higher taxes on wealth as well as rent control. Orion waffled on the issues first supporting rent control and then opposing it. One of his slogans was "It's not us against them—it's all of us!"

The narrative put out by Orion and others was that the best solutions were collaborative. Implicitly, we had to accept the current division of wealth and power and find solutions within those parameters. In other word , the only "pragmatic" solutions were ones that the capitalists would accept. It would be crediting this narrative too much to call it class collaborationism, since classes were not even acknowledged. Middle class people and other home owners were most receptive to this collaborationism.

Orion denounced Sawant for serving an ideology rather than looking for practical, local solutions. She was also criticized for being under the control of her political organization, Socialist Alternative, which had, horror of horrors, national and international positions. It should be obvious to any observer that city governments in the U.S. are financially strapped but the business candidates refused to admit this, totally rejecting the relevance of national and international or even statewide issues.

The pro-business approach struck an accord with many voters—hence Sawant's poor showing in the primary. The reason for this was primarily "pragmatism." Small business owners were tired of homeless people supposedly driving away business. Petty crime including burglary was a problem. Parents complained that homeless drug users left needles in parks and school play grounds. Property values of homes was impacted by people on the street.

The problems associated with these issues have been exacerbated by the local Sinclair TV channel which put out a misleading documentary called "Seattle Is Dying." The bigoted response to homelessness is of course aggravated by racism. A disproportionate number of the homeless are people of color. Gentrification of the city has resulted in the expulsion of people of color into the surrounding areas or into homelessness. This highlights a contradiction within the working class. Though most workers living in Seattle are renters , a significant portion of workers own homes. As precarious as that ownership is, usually much or all of their wealth is wrapped up in their homes. Concern about home values is an important component of many worker's consciousness.

Obviously, many home owners are middle class so incipient working class consciousness does not impact their views of the homeless issue. Adding up home owning workers and middle class home owners creates a large bloc prone to conservatism on issues of housing and "public safety." This has been expressed many times in rowdy public meetings against politicians who are not doing enough about the crisis.

However, the other side of the equation is also typical of U.S. and world politics. Working and poor people are ravaged by neoliberalism and capitalism generally. Living standards have stagnated and dropped. Even with Seattle's relatively high minimum wage (over $16 this year), there is no way a full-time minimum-wage worker could afford an average apartment. It would take 130 hours of work at minimum wage just to pay the monthly rent, not even including utilities. This would leave only 43 hours of pay to buy food, utilities , transportation , medical care and every other need.

These pressures accelerate developing class consciousness, including support for or at least tolerance of socialist ideas—as we have seen across the U.S. and around the world.

The clash of these world views pulled voters in different directions—though of course mixed consciousness was the rule. Polarization is as real in Seattle as any place else. This is ironic since all major politicians and the vast majority of people would say they oppose Trump and the right. The far right has little pull in Seattle but it has made its presence felt and is a growing menace.

Sawant ran in only one district in Seattle—Capitol Hill/Central Area, the historic but gentrifying home of Seattle's Black community, the LGBTQ community and many young people including students. However, she led the citywide campaign against the business-backed candidates.

Limitations of the Sawant Campaign

In doing so, some of the reformist politics of Socialist Alternative came out. She heavily oriented to small business. She also framed the campaign as an attempt to prevent a business takeover of city government. In reality , under capitalism the state is always a capitalist state. Business doesn't need to promote a take over. It is already in charge. The official government is important , but never fully in charge of even government operations. While the Council debated, the police continued to raid homeless camps. Though Big Business claimed it was on the outs, it actually still called the shots. The vote repealing the Amazon employee hour tax was a sign of continual business dominance of the supposedly progressive City Council.

Future of Seattle Politics

What does this election say about the state of politics in Seattle? The re-election of Sawant is a victory for workers and the left in Seattle. She will continue to rally people around progressive issues. Movement organizing has put pressure on the Council and won some results including renter protections, as well as proclamation of Indigenous People's Day, mandatory sick leave and other issues. The defeat of pro-business candidates is a good sign about popular consciousness. It opens up the prospect of more effective organizing.

However, the stalemate continues. Business will continue to dominate the Council even through the newly elected "progressive" candidates. The rest of the newly elected Council members do not have the firm pro-working class politics that Sawant does. They are generally Democratic Party-oriented liberals.

Big Business will use its economic muscle to continue to set the agenda. It will take mass organizing to create the pressure necessary for the Council to stand up even in part to business pressure. The stalemate on housing and homeless issues will continue to create frustration that can turn to the right without a strong alternative.

Socialist Organizing in the Future

Socialists in Seattle should continue to pay attention to the City Council and intervene in elections. We should continue to support Sawant and other independent socialists. This is true even though the pull of electoral office conservatizes socialists. Sawant, for example, voted for the latest police chief rather than denouncing the police and voting "no." Pragmatism is a pull on any elected politician including socialists. The priority however should be to build popular movements that can threaten the political and economic establishment and force concessions. The stalemate will never be fully resolved under capitalism. This leads to the most important goal for Marxists: to build a revolutionary socialist alternative to overthrow this crisis-ridden inhumane system.