In Defense of Kshama Sawant

written by Scott McLemee | January 9, 2021

Call it a voter-suppression effort, ex post facto.

The attempt to remove Kshama Sawant from her seat on Seattle's City Council through a recall petition is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of constituents — and on the emergence of a new socialist left as a current in American politics. Sawant is the public face of Socialist Alternative, one of numerous small Marxist organizations in the United States. But defending her from corporate and right-wing attack is an issue that everyone on the left in the United States should support.

Sawant has been elected to her position three times now, running on a platform of solidarity with the Seattle's workers — backed up by heavy and long overdue taxation of the city's millionaires and billionaires. In the summer of 2020 she gave full support to Black Lives Matter. And that seems to have been the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back: Sawant's activity in solidarity with BLM features prominently in the recall campaign's complaints about her.

With hindsight, it's clear that Sawant's election to City Council in 2013 foreshadowed the groundswell of support for Bernie Sanders's presidential run in 2016. The platform for her first campaign included public ownership of Washington state's corporate behemoths, including Microsoft and Amazon. More recently, her page on the City Council website has demanded taxation "to fund immediate COVID-19 relief for working people, and then to go on in 2021 and beyond to fund a massive expansion of new, affordable, social housing and Green New Deal renovations of existing homes."

In 2019, Amazon contributed $1.5 million to a political action committee opposed to Sawant, who was reelected anyway.

In June, when mass protests against the murder of George Floyd and other victims of police violence swept the country, The Seattle Times quoted Sawant as saying: "The police have inflicted tear gas, mace, rubber bullets, flash-bang grenades, curfews, arrests and other repressive tactics on Seattle activists and residents — including children — in an attempt to bully and silence the protest movement." She called for the resignation of Jenny Durkan, Seattle's mayor.

Durkan responded with a letter to the City Council urging it to expel Sawant. The City Council declined to do so. But when a formal recall petition was filed with the King County Election Office in mid-August, it bore more than a passing resemblance to Durkan's letter.

Details of the ensuing legal process are covered by an entry on the recall at the Ballotpedia site, which also presents the formal complaint initiating the recall effort. Suffice it to say that in January 2021, the state's Supreme Court will rule on Sawant's appeal to have the petition thrown out. If she loses the appeal, the anti-Sawant forces will begin trying to get 10,700 signatures from registered voters in her district (a quarter of the votes cast in the 2019 election) to have the recall put on the ballot, probably sometime in the spring or summer.

In short, after consuming much of their time and energy during the last third of 2020, Sawant and her supporters are likely to have the recall threat hanging over them for much of 2021. An opinion piece by a Socialist Alternative member published in Real Change, one of Seattle's alternative newspapers, spells out what they are up against:

> The public part of the recall donor list reads like a who's who of Seattle's business elite, including Trump-supporting billionaire Martin Selig and corporate executives like Airbnb Chief Financial Officer David Stephenson and Merrill Lynch Senior Vice President Matt Westphal. The recall campaign is absurdly trying to portray their supporters as a grassroots group of local 'concerned citizens' while painting Sawant's support as coming from out-of-town agitators — a typical right-wing attack. But the truth is that Sawant has more than twice as many donors from her district than the recall campaign does — with already 670 District 3 donors, compared to only 322 District 3 donors for the recall campaign. The most common professions of our donors are educators, students and tech workers, in sharp contrast to the district's super rich backing the recall campaign.

But class solidarity never ends at the city limits. This attack on a militant socialist political figure — and on the people she represents — poses a danger that every socialist should recognize. Please follow the Sawant Solidarity Campaign and, if possible, consider donating to its effort.

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