Interview with Socialist Alternative Candidate Kshama Sawant

written by Kshama Sawant, Andrew Sernatinger | November 3, 2012

Andrew Sernatinger: I'm speaking today with Kshama Sawant, a socialist running for a seat in the Washington State House of Representatives against Democrat Frank Chopp, presently the House Speaker. Kshama is a lecturer in economics at Seattle University and Seattle Central Community College, and is a member of Socialist Alternative. Kshama, thanks for speaking with me today.

Kshama Sawant: Thank you for having me.

AS: I wanted to do this interview because there are so few left electoral campaigns in the US, and when they happen I think they're worth our attention and some examination. If it's alright with you, I'd like to start at the beginning. Why did you decide to run for the Washington State Legislature, and what politically motivates this campaign?

KS: I think at the outset I should say that as a socialist and an activist in Socialist Alternative, we have a slightly different approach to elections or any other campaign for that matter. I don't unilaterally decide that I want to run for office, rather the decision is about whether to run an election campaign as socialists or not, and then the people who are in the organization democratically decide who should be the candidate. I think that's important to mention in itself because it demonstrates what vision we have for a future society: where genuine democracy, meaning genuine rights to make decisions that affect peoples' lives, is at the center.

And as far as why we decided to run this campaign, I think our observation about political events in recent events is the answer. We live in very changed times since the last year. We've seen the Arab Spring, the Egyptian and Tunisian Revolutions, the Wisconsin uprising of the public sector, and the Occupy Movement. And in the United States the Occupy Movement really was a watershed event and it broke the silence on some things that people had been thinking about but had not been able to express. Meaning the deep economic inequality, the outrage at how the rapacious and greedy banks who caused the financial collapse were the ones getting bailed out while there were massive budget cuts to education and social services, enormous levels of foreclosures of ordinary people who had lost their jobs. So there is a lot of latent anger in American society and Occupy really crystallized that and brought it to the surface.

Our campaign is inspired by our involvement in Occupy, and we thought that the time was right for the Left to run candidates. In fact, I would say that many more candidates on the left should have run in this election year. I hope that in the coming years there will be a confluence of bigger movements of young people and older people and disabled and workers along with grassroots campaigns.

AS: Why did you decide to run for State office? Is there any reason in particular or it just happened to be something that was available?

KS: Primarily it was based upon where we could run a strong campaign, but it's also a very interesting phenomenon that's happening here. We're running against Frank Chopp, who is the Speaker of the House and the most powerful legislator in Olympia [the capitol of Washington]. He has been in the Legislature for seventeen years and the speaker for ten years. Our campaign is

raising critical points, not only about him but also of the entire Democratic Party. Statewide what we're seeing is brutal attacks against funding for education and healthcare and other social programs, including disability.

It's an interesting state because the Democratic Party has been in the majority for years, in both the House and Senate. They also have had the Governor's Mansion for years. What we've seen is not what you might expect with liberal or progressive policies, but actually Washington State happens to have the most regressive tax system in the entire nation. The state also happens to be the home of major multinational corporations like Boeing, Microsoft, Amazon, Starbucks and so on, which pay historically low taxes on their profits.

We thought this was an especially striking situation where we have a phenomenally wealthy state where basic needs of people are not being satisfied. We hear this rhetoric over and over from the Democrats that, "we're trying to save education and healthcare but we can't because we need to balance the budget and this is the only thing we can cut." But that is a blatant lie because they could be raising taxes on corporations and the super wealthy. One fact I'll quickly mention is that the Seattle metropolitan area has the tenth largest concentration of super-wealthy people, households who have at least $30 million.

Our campaign is calling for full funding of free, good quality education, single-payer healthcare and high-quality public transit. We know that all this can be funded if we had political representation in Olympia that could boldly and courageously argue for taxing corporations and the super wealthy.

AS: To clarify, you're running as the Socialist Alternative candidate in Washington. Is Socialist Alternative a party in Washington or how does that work?

KS: We are primarily an activist organization, but for the purposes of this campaign we are running as a party. I am running as the Socialist Alternative candidate and that's what shows up on the ballot.

AS: You made reference earlier to the Occupy movement. How does your campaign relate to Occupy, and does what remains of Occupy see your campaign favorably and support your initiatives?

KS: Our campaign relates to Occupy in the sense that we are running this campaign in an era after Occupy has happened. There is a political space now where people are sick and tired of being silenced and accepting the status quo. That changed political atmosphere and consciousness is very much an outcome of this year of movements, which Occupy has been a part of. That has very much to do with why this campaign has been so successful already.

I would say that for a first campaign running on a shoe-string budget, running openly as socialists this has already been a trail-blazing campaign. We were written in by a community campaign into this position against Frank Chopp. We won 10% of the votes against Frank Chopp where we were not on the ballot but people wrote us in. I think that is a very strong indicator of how the political mood has shifted since Occupy. It gives an indication of the times to come.

AS: You were talking earlier about running on a shoe-string budget. The numbers your website give suggest you have about a tenth of the budget of your opponent, where you have roughly $16,000. How have you been able to organize your campaign to be so successful to get into the primary and then to where you are now?

KS: Right, I think that it really is a testament not only to the commitment and energy that our

campaign team and all our volunteers have brought in, which I have to say is incredibly humbling and amazing, but its also reflecting the hunger that people are feeling for alternatives. I have myself tabled, been out on the street handing out leaflets and talking to people in the district and outside the district about our campaign. Overwhelmingly people have been supportive of the campaign precisely because they have had enough. They're tired of not having options.

You can see that not only in our state race, and there's no Republican running in our race. But nationally, if you see the enthusiasm that progressive voters had for Obama in 2008 versus what they have now, it's a night and day difference. In 2008, women, youth, people of color went out in historic numbers to vote for Obama, but now a lot more people are probably going to stay home. Jill Stein's campaign has gained some visibility. It shows that while people might end up voting for Democrats, its not the same as it was four years ago. Most people are just holding their nose and voting Democrat because they at least want to vote for the lesser evil. But in reality what they would like is a real alternative, a real campaign which in a genuine way represents the interest of ordinary people.

A very important aspect of why our campaign is striking a chord with people in the district and nationally is that we are very clear about where we stand. We're not taking any corporate donations; we do not want to be beholden to corporations. We have no interest in making lucrative careers for ourselves. We want this campaign to serve as a rallying point for bigger movements, for bigger electoral campaigns next year. We're talking about running a slate of candidates on the left for Seattle city council, and maybe even the Mayoral race if possible.

I think that actually not having corporate funding is helping us make a connection with people, because most people are angry that the control that corporations have on the political agenda. Its extremely refreshing for people to see a campaign that is gaining some ground that is being very principled about that.

AS: You were saying earlier that you're running as an explicitly pro-worker candidate. How has organized labor and other parts of the left responded to your campaign?

KS: That's a very interesting question because it contains some of the heart of what needs to change in the United States in order to have movements of the working class succeed. As far as endorsements are concerned, we've been endorsed by a local of the Communication Workers of America, Wash-Tech, and we are endorsed by a group of workers called the Organized Workers for Labor Solidarity.

But the reality is that even though many rank and file workers may be angry about the situation and want a change, the bigger reality of the labor movement in the past thirty years is that the labor leadership is tied at the hip to the Democratic Party. Labor unions bring out tens of thousands of foot soldiers for the Democratic Party to campaign for them; they give them hundreds of thousands of dollars. Unquestioningly. Unchallengingly. Uncritically.

That is precisely why labor is getting battered. All the gains that ordinary people have made, that the working class has made has all happened because people went out in the streets and put pressure on the Democratic Party. You didn't get that by giving the Democratic Party money and not asking them any questions.

AS: Earlier you said that your campaign is premised off of the idea that there is both an opening and a need for left, pro-worker candidates in this political moment. How do you respond to those like Bruce Ramsay, the Seattle Times columnist who wrote, "If the Democrats had tried to push through a hard left agenda, they probably would have quickly

lost their majority."

KS: Bruce Ramsay is probably a more right-wing libertarian, but whether he intended to or not he actually has presented a very insightful point. The reality is that there are some well-meaning people in the Democratic Party who truly want to carry out a progressive agenda, but this is what happens: if you belong to a party whose elite is in bed with corporations, then you cannot actually carry out an agenda that is in favor of ordinary people or the working class.

What the Democratic Party does, and this is classic of their role, is they play lip service to the working class but then their policymaking is primarily, or sometimes almost entirely, skewed in favor of big business. So its true, if Frank Chopp were to wake up tomorrow and call a press conference to say, "I'm going to fight for single payer healthcare. I'm going to fight for fully funded public education because I know it can be done, and I'm going to tax Boeing and Microsoft," what would happen is that he would become a hero for ordinary people but he would be punished by his corporate masters. As long as he's serving his corporate masters, he's not going to be able to do that.

AS: One of the interesting things about this campaign is that it's just between a Democrat, Frank Chopp, and yourself as the socialist candidate, which eliminates charges that you could "spoil" the election and hand it to the Republicans. What are our thoughts on the significance of this and what do you think are the broader implications of the race?

KS: I think that not having a Republican in the race makes it easier for people who are worried about the so-called "spoilers". But to be honest, if a Republican was running in the race we wouldn't let that stop us. This whole logic of lesser-evilism leads us nowhere. The logic is that sometimes the Democrats may appear a little bit to the left of Republicans, but you know conservative economics and capitalists always talk about "incentives". Think about the incentive structure for the Democrats: if you're going to vote for them no matter what they do, then they have no incentive to shape up and do something for you, which is where the pressure from mass movements comes in.

When a campaign like ours runs, whether a Republican is running or not, it provides us an opportunity to clarify that circular logic. Yes, there is no Republican in our race so if you're a progressive you should freely vote for us. But, also realize the politics of fear is not the answer and its never going to be the answer.

AS: Do you feel like in your campaign specifically that the absence of a Republican has made people more attracted to your campaign who otherwise might be afraid of the "spoiler" issue?

KS: It's hard to say because the district is a very progressive district and both the Democrats running in this district, Jamie Peterson and Frank Chopp, are both well to the right of many of the views of this district. This is a district that loves its public transit, very pro-progressive policies on homelessness and education. The district includes two of the biggest state institutions, Seattle Central Community College and the University of Washington-Seattle, both of which have seen ridiculous amounts of tuitions increases and loss of funding.

So it would be difficult for me to predict, but I would say that even if a Republican were running, just looking at the statistics from past races Republicans don't usually get much of a foothold in this district. I would venture to say that even if a Republican were running we'd still be striking quite a chord.

AS: At the end of September you actually did get to have a direct debate with your

opponent, Frank Chopp. I thought it was a little bit unusual that a major party candidate agreed to the debate. Can you talk about how that went and what you thought the outcome was?

KS: We did have debate; it was organized by the Socialist Alternative student club at Seattle University. They invited both me and Frank Chopp to the debate. Interestingly, Mr. Chopp assumed at first that it was going to be a tame forum: there wouldn't be a real debate and both candidates would just state their campaigns and having a very nicey-nice dialog.

When he was sent the program for the debate he was livid and he actually called one of the student members and chewed her out. We didn't hide the fact that we're Socialist Alternative, so it seems inconceivable that we would invite you and not have you debate our candidate. But he did come and I thought he did pretty well. I thought the debate was a really excellent opportunity for us to have a serious discussion of the political discussion between the Democrats and our campaign. (It's on YouTube for anyone to watch.)

Something that I wasn't anticipating was that he has never actually had any response for why such massive cuts have been necessary for ordinary people. It's really illuminating to have an actual challenge to that kind of framework. We can say, "No, we reject that choice. It's a false choice. What we really need is full funding and cutting most of the funding and leaving the crumbs for us is not what I'd call saving [services]."

In every subsequent debate he talks less like a canned politician and is trying to sound more like an activist. Simply having a genuine working class representation in opposition is forcing him to alter the language he's presenting because he can see that people are rallying around our message. I think people should recognize that itself as a victory for this campaign. Understand that this is what puts pressure on Democrats. Not voting for Dems unchallengingly every four years, but challenging them because then they're forced to do something about it. If we keep up this pressure, we can win actually material gains for the working class. We can win an increasing minimum wage, we could win single payer healthcare.

AS: Most people don't realize that Washington State has among the most regressive tax structures in the country. Washington has no income tax and politicians often claim that they need to maintain a tangle of tax exemptions to keep the multinational corporations the states houses—earlier you mentioned Boeing and Amazon and the like. How has your campaign addressed this?

KS: Just to give you some background, in 2010 in the midterm elections there was a ballot measure, "1098" that was going to be a tax on high incomes. It failed. If you look at what happened in the run-up to the 2010 elections, when 1098 was first introduced it had two-thirds supporting it. What happened in the run-up to the general elections was that the right wing went on an all-out assault on the bill. They did an unbelievable media blitz.

It was directed to ordinary, working class people and they said, "if you vote for this measure, then in another couple of years the taxes will come to you and not just on the wealthy." If you look at the facts, this was completely untrue, but do you know why most people ended up voting against 1098?

One reason was that the Democrats never counted that assault from the right wing. The Democrats are more powerful than the Republicans in this state, and they could have done their own media blitz. They could have knocked on doors. They could have been shouting from the rooftops that that was a lie and that 1098 would be good for the people. They didn't do anything for it! I don't remember seeing a single Democratic legislator when we were pounding the pavement for 1098.

The second reason people voted against it is that virtually every time the Democrats have passed a revenue increase, it has been regressive. They tax things like soda, candy, gasoline and cigarettes, which affect the poorest people the most. So it was not a stretch of the imagination for people to believe that if they passed this, eventually the taxes would come on their shoulders.

If you really want to fight for a progressive tax, then you have to take on corporate interests in a real way, not in a lip service way.

AS: How can people support your campaign if they want to?

KS: The first thing I would urge everyone to do is go to our website. Votesawant.org We would really appreciate financial contributions and other kinds of contributions: we need people with creative skills and ideas about how we can effectively use the last two weeks. We also want people to send us their views. If they really like our campaigns, we want to hear from them. Just get in touch with us and we'll write back to you. If you want to know more about socialism I really invite you to have discussions with us.

At this point I'd really stress that we need financial contributions. We have a shoe-string budget and we're making it go as far as it can go, but we have to face the fact that we need resources to print leaflets, to have yard signs, to allow people to take time off work so that they can work on our campaign.

AS: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we go?

KS: I hope that people draw a lot of inspiration and energy from how this campaign has gone. Most important of all, people should have conversations with others and spark that whole discussion and debate about what needs to happen. What we need very urgently in America is not just a huge movement, but many huge movements. The only solution to this is a revolt. You realize the latent power of the working class, we are the 99% they are the 1%. There are so many more of us and the only thing holding us back is our fear.

AS: Thanks so much for speaking with me, Kshama.

KS: Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Sernatinger is an independent journalist based in Madison, Wisconsin.