

Solidarity in city salaries

Seattle's new council member ponies up her own paycheck toward the \$15 minimum-wage movement

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Kshama Sawant took her oath of office Jan. 6 in front of hundreds at Seattle City Hall. She plans to take home an "average worker's wage" and donate the rest of her \$120,000 annual salary to a campaign to create a \$15-an-hour minimum wage and other social-justice causes.

Kshama Sawant took the same oath of office as fellow Seattle City Councilmembers Sally Bagshaw, Nick Licata and Mike O'Brien when she was sworn in Jan. 6. But at the end of January, Seattle's newest councilmember will be taking home a very different salary.

Sawant intends to keep only a fraction of the nearly \$120,000 annual salary paid to each Seattle City Councilmember and donate the rest to a campaign to create a local \$15-an-hour minimum wage and other social justice causes.

Philip Locker, Sawant's campaign manager, said her office will be accountable to local people, not corporate interests.

"How could she do that if she's taking the salary of a 1-percenter?" Locker said.

Sawant declined to be interviewed for this story. Locker said she was too busy with inaugural activities.

Thus far, councilmembers' salaries have been a non-issue. Sawant's move could put council pay at the center of the debate over economic inequality.

The Seattle City Council sets its salary each year as it finalizes the budget, said Eric Ishino, finance manager for the city's legislative department. The salaries are based on information collected from the Puget Sound Economic Forecaster and the Washington State Economic and Revenue



Forecast Council. The pay goes up slightly each year, but never goes down, Ishino said.

City councilmembers' salaries have gone up almost 25 percent from 2005 when councilmembers made between \$93,960 and \$96,507 before taxes.

The budget includes information on how much each councilmember will receive, but unlike other budget items, it attracts little attention.

"It's not discussed at all," Ishino said. "They're advised of what the amount will be, and it becomes part of the budget that's passed."

Seattle's lawmakers are among the nation's most highly paid public servants. According to a 2011 study by The Pew Charitable Trusts Philadelphia Research Initiative, members of the Los Angeles City Council make the most, at \$178,789. At nearly \$120,000 per year, Seattle councilmembers take home more than their counterparts in Boston and Chicago.

"It's a scandal," Locker said.

Portland city commissioners make about \$100,000.

When Sawant accepts her first paycheck this month, she will set up a fund to support social justice movements and launch a

website to show where she donates a portion of her salary, Locker said.

What Sawant will keep and where she will donate her money is being determined, he said. The median household income in Seattle is \$63,470, according to the U.S. Census.

Sawant won't be the first to redistribute her city earnings. Other Seattle councilmembers already donate a portion of their salary, but do so quietly, said councilmember Sally Bagshaw. Bagshaw said before taking office in 2009, she decided to donate a portion of her salary, but she declined to say how much she donates.

"You'd be shocked at how much money we (councilmembers) give away," Bagshaw said.

Sawant, a Seattle Central Community College economics professor, beat 16-year incumbent Richard Conlin with an Occupy-inspired campaign platform of securing a \$15-an-hour minimum wage and decrying corporate politics at city hall.

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Seattle City Council member-elect Kshama Sawant addresses the crowd during a rally to raise the hourly minimum wage to \$15 for fast-food workers at City Hall in Seattle.

REUTERS/DAVID RYDER

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