



# A warrior for the working class

*Kshama Sawant, Seattle's socialist City Council member, is coming to Portland to talk about organizing and movement building*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KSHAMA SAWANT

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

Before Kshama Sawant won a seat on the Seattle City Council, she was a prominent organizer within the city's Occupy movement. Now in her fourth year at City Hall, the former software engineer and economics professor has remained committed to activism.

A member of the Socialist Alternative party, Sawant is a proponent of democratic socialism and has been successful in leading grassroots campaigns to benefit the working class of her city. First came the Fight for \$15; more recently an income tax on the rich; next up is rent control.

Originally from India, a country known for extreme income inequality, she said it was the breadth of poverty she witnessed in the U.S. that she credits for her radicalization.

According to the party platform, Socialist Alternative members believe the capitalist system is the root cause of economic crisis, poverty, discrimination, war and environmental destruction. The party aims to build a movement that will take the top 500 corporations into public ownership under democratic control to end elite control of global competition for profits and power.

During her bid for City Council, Sawant announced she would take home no more pay than the average Seattle worker. She has lived up to that campaign promise, keeping \$40,000 of her \$117,000 annual salary and donating the rest to social justice movements.

She'll be in Portland on Sept. 30 to give the keynote address at Portland Jobs with Justice's annual dinner, a fundraiser for the coalition of more than 100 labor organizations and community groups.

Sawant said Portland Jobs with Justice has focused its efforts on the struggles she believes working people in cities across the country should be addressing. She plans to discuss organizing, movement building and the direction of the left at the Portland dinner.

In advance of her Portland appearance,



*Kshama Sawant (above) participates in a March 31 rally urging Amazon to hold its contractors accountable. Security Industry Specialists, a security contractor, came under fire for its treatment of Muslim workers. Sawant, a socialist activist, has also fought against big banks' unethical practices and for defunding the Dakota Access Pipeline.*

Sawant spoke with Street Roots about her strategy for fighting homelessness in Seattle and how the nation needs to strengthen its labor movement. We began our interview with a question from Street Roots vendor Charles McPherson.

**Charles McPherson:** *My wife and I want to start a recreational marijuana grow and use the money to build homes for the homeless. What do you think about private businesses funding housing for the homeless?*

**Kshama ("Shaw-ma") Sawant:** I think given the massive crisis in affordable housing and the explosion of homelessness, we have to pinpoint that the sources are not at all what the economists and many corporate politicians will have us believe, which is individual responsibility. But as a matter of fact, the explosion of the homelessness crisis is a symptom of how deeply dysfunctional capitalism is and also how much worse living standards have gotten with the last several decades of the pushback against labor unions and against organizing and the decimation of mass

movements.

I think one of the starting points to change this situation is for us to build mass movements, and we demand that big business is taxed to deal with the question of homelessness, specifically, taxing big corporations to generate the revenues to build enough affordable housing units so that we can completely eliminate the problem of homelessness. I absolutely think that we should be doing that. I would focus primarily on the most profitable organizations that have made millions if not billions for a small number of people who have benefited from it and left the rest of us at the wayside.

I want to add one more point on the question of homelessness, because it's on the forefront of the homelessness issue in Seattle, and that is the question of how the City Council and the mayor respond to the problem of homelessness.

Homelessness now, not just in Seattle but in King County, the greater Seattle region, has been so acute that it has forced politicians – even though they may ordinarily simply pay lip service – it has

forced them to recognize it and respond. A year and a half ago, the mayor of Seattle – now going to be the former mayor – Ed Murray, stated an emergency around the homelessness crisis. But the actual policies that have followed have been anywhere from meager to nonexistent.

One policy that has been followed systematically is the one policy that should not be carried out – sweeps of homeless encampments, because (the sweeps) they are inhumane and ineffective. In this last year alone, the mayor carried out 601 sweeps of homeless encampments. And it hasn't made, as you might imagine, any dent in the homelessness problem because when you sweep homeless people without any real options for housing, they're just going to come back there or go somewhere else because they need to exist somewhere, but the homelessness situation remains unchanged. And we don't even know how much money our city has spent on this because there is no budget line item that says, "This is how much the mayor spent on sweeps." All the departments – the department of public utilities, the department of transportation, the police department – the personnel of those departments are used on a regular basis to carry out these sweeps. So I would estimate, without adding a number that I have asked for but not got, I would imagine at least millions have been spent on those hundreds of sweeps – millions of taxpayer money in the context of the most regressive tax system in the entire nation.\*

There is massive outrage at the fact these sweeps are being carried out with almost zero solutions for housing. I am outraged about it, and what we are talking about right now, our movement, is to make the business tax more progressive but also put more on big corporations so that small businesses pay less than they are now but big businesses pay more than they are now, so that we can raise \$160 million over five years to build 1,000 units of affordable housing every year that could be targeted

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