

**SAWANT, from page 4**

toward homeless people, but also used for funding for services so that people have a cushion to fall on so that they don't become homeless in the first place.

All the politicians know everything I'm talking about. It's a question of political will. How are we going to generate the political will unless we have candidates running for office who are part of the movement, who are accountable to the movement and don't take money from big business so that when they go to City Hall, they use their office to amplify the voice of movements and to really fight for the oppressed.

*\*(Why Washington has the "most regressive tax system": In Washington, there is no statewide income tax, so the poor pay a much larger portion of their income on taxes than the wealthy through the state's sales and property taxes. In July, Seattle City Council unanimously approved an income tax on only the wealthy residents of the city, an initiative championed by Sawant.)*

**Emily Green:** So few Americans are represented by unions, yet most of us work. Do you see a viable replacement for the traditional union model that would include the needs of all working people in its efforts?

**K.S.:** You're right, that in the last several decades the labor movement and the unions as an organization have taken a severe beating, much of it starting in the Reagan-Thatcher era. It's been, in many ways, a downward spiral. But I think you can also see that, just in the logic of capitalism, unless workers get organized, in a real way – meaning we get united behind a common political demand like \$15 an hour, like rent control, like taxing the rich, getting organized to build unity in our political demands, developing strategies and tactics for the movement so that we are able to push back against the might of big business – unless workers and ordinary people get organized in some shape or form, we have no hope of defeating the might of big business and the political elite that support them. That's the system of capitalism, and we're fighting against those forces. There is no alternative to that kind of mass organizing.

We should resist the temptation of looking at unions as something old fashioned, but while recognizing and making a sober assessment of how far we have to go. We are starting almost at rock bottom in some ways given that the vast majority of labor in America and in our cities is not unionized; young workers especially are not unionized. But the cycle here, this is a concrete example of how we won in 2015 – and a woman is running as a socialist for Minneapolis City Council now – the only reason we won is because we were organized; we had a grassroots campaign that actually brought working people together, something like a union.

As we continue to build movements in our lifetime, it will require organizing workers and the unions. But the other dimension to this that I should mention within the labor movement right now, there are workers who are unionized, but there is an urgent need to raise up rank and file representation and realize democracy within unions.

Look at the downfall from last year. Most



*Kshama Sawant is a member of the Socialist Alternative party, which pushes back against capitalism.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF KSHAMA SAWANT

**IF YOU GO**

**What:** "Our Community, Our Cause," Portland Jobs with Justice's annual dinner with guest Kshama Sawant; music from Eddie Parente Trio

**When:** Saturday, Sept. 30; doors open at 6 p.m., program and dinner from 7 to 9 p.m.

**Where:** OHSU Collaborative Life Sciences Building, in the ground-floor atrium, 2730 SW Moody Ave., Portland

**Tickets:** Tickets ranging from \$40 to \$175 can be purchased at the door if space is still available, or in advance via [jwipdx.org](http://jwipdx.org)

major unions endorsed Hillary Clinton, but if you talked to most of the rank and file members of those unions, they said they voted for Bernie Sanders in the primary.

Why did major unions, like SEIU (Service Employees International Union), national unions, which could be decisive factors in national election outcomes, why would they endorse Hillary Clinton in the primary? Randi Weingarten, the president of my union, AFT (American Federation of Teachers), she went door-knocking for Hillary Clinton while most of us teachers, members of her union, were supporting Bernie Sanders.

We need to demand real accountability. Rank and file have to get organized within their unions to fight for greater democracy. Seattle has a mayoral race going on, and unfortunately, the (M.L.) King County Labor Council (affiliated with National AFL-CIO) has just endorsed Jenny Durkan, the most corporate candidate in the race, the candidate who comes with the blessing of the Chamber of Commerce and all the businesses that fought hard against \$15 an hour and launched lawsuit after lawsuit on every worker law that we have succeeded in passing. Why is the Labor Council endorsing that candidate? They should be fighting to run working-class candidates who are

accountable to the labor movement.

**E.G.:** Oregon has been getting pretty cozy with (Seattle-based) Amazon lately. We have two new fulfillment centers hiring thousands of people (and on Sept. 18, a third fulfillment center, in Portland, was announced), and we plan to bid on the new corporate headquarters. Any lessons we should take from Seattle on this one?

**K.S.:** This is a very good time for us to be talking about this. As you know, just days ago Amazon announced that they are looking for a different city for their new headquarters, and it's a chilling message to Seattle, but it's not a new one. It's reminiscent of what happened with Boeing. Boeing has carried out, and is still carrying out, a decades-long extortion of working people and taxpayers in this state, and every time they have done that, they say, "If you don't do this or that, we will take away your jobs."

But this is not about good apples versus bad apples. This is the logic of capitalism, and as long as there are workers in other cities and other countries that are worse off than us, who are willing to accept worse-off conditions just to get the jobs, the jobs will move; the companies will move. The only way to reject this race to the bottom is for workers to refuse to be pitted against each other in this kind of perverse bidding war and say we fight for workers everywhere.

Ultimately, the solution is for workers to fight everywhere and in solidarity.

We don't want a system where a few people make such an unimaginable profit and everybody else has to live in deplorable conditions, not to mention the conditions in which the workers in the Amazon warehouses work: Amazon workers who want to unionize. Fulfillment centers, which by the way is an ominously Orwellian name considering the conditions the workers face there, so we need to begin fighting on that basis, and not accept the logic of corporate politicians and the corporations themselves.

**E.G.:** Seattle used to be like Portland, in that its city councilors were elected citywide. But as you know, in 2013 that changed, and now Seattle's councilors represent geographical districts instead. Can you tell me how this

restructuring has changed city politics either for the better or the worse?

**K.S.:** When we ran our first campaign for City Council in 2013, we ran citywide, and that same year, the district initiative was passed by ballot. When I ran for re-election in 2015, by then it was a district election, and I ran for District 3, which is essentially the central part of the city. I would say from the standpoint of grassroots campaigns like ours, which has never taken any corporate cash in campaign donations, we ran our campaign entirely, without exception, on the basis of funding from working people because our campaign and our office belongs to working people and the labor movement, and so for us, running a districtwide campaign is much less daunting in terms of the resources it demands than running a citywide campaign.

But as you've seen, it's also possible to win a much more daunting citywide campaign even openly as a socialist, so in terms of resources for a grassroots campaign, I would say this is something we can take advantage of in Seattle. But you can also see in the last two years since the district initiative passed, that by itself it is no guarantee of outcomes that are more favorable for those who are left out of city politics.

There is no shying away from the real political struggle, which means regardless of the conditions you face, each day it was that ordinary people, homeless people, those who are marginalized become organized in a movement and really fight back, which means building street heat, building workforce actions. It also means that while not every campaign will be won, our movements need to run candidates because we will generate an inspiring example so that we can really build movements on top of them. Because having even one voice, as we've shown in City Hall, can completely change the dynamic of a city's politics.

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