

Socialist Candidates Do Unexpectedly Well in City Elections

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The surprisingly good showing by socialists, Kshama Sawant and Ty Morre in city council elections in Seattle and Minneapolis has attracted the attention of the U.S. left and even of the major news media. The strong campaigns and high vote counts—Sawant won her race, while Moore won 42 percent in his district—suggest that something may be changing politically in America.

Kshama Sawant, an economics teacher at a community college, a teachers union member, and Occupy Seattle activist, ran for the Seattle City Council as an openly socialist candidate against Democrat Richard Conlin, a longtime council member. Sawant's campaign received endorsements from four major labor unions, environmental organizations, and many prominent individuals on the left. Similarly, Ty Moore, a former bus driver and a local community organizer, ran for the Minneapolis City Council with the backing of a major labor union, an LGBT organization, the Green Party, and a local group fighting evictions. Both campaigns were organized by Socialist Alternative which comes out of the Trotskyist tradition and is affiliated with the Committee for a Workers International.

The Socialist Alternative campaigns are all the more remarkable for being a political rarity in the United States. It is more than a hundred years since, Eugene V. Debs, the leader of the American Railway Union, was the Socialist Party candidate for U.S. president in 1912, receiving 900,000 votes representing 6 percent of the total. The Socialist and Communist Party ran candidates for president in the 1920s and 1930s, though they received very few votes. By the mid-1930s both the Socialists and the Communists had become tacit supporters of the Democratic Party and, with the exception of the Communists' perennial Gus Hall, there were few socialist campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s.

During the 1970s the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party ran many local, state and national campaigns, including Peter Camejo's presidential run 1976 run for president. Maoist groups in the United States, following the footsteps of the Communist Party of the Popular Front era, supported Democratic Party candidates and worked enthusiastically for Jesse Jackson, the African American civil rights leader, who ran for president in 1984 and 1988. Only the small and sectarian Party of Socialism and Liberation has had much presence in local elections.

Since then the American left has supported the Green Party campaigns, most important Ralph Nader's presidential campaign of 2000 that received 2.7 percent of the vote. During the 2000s, most American leftists have generally worked in unions and social movement, without attempt to create a socialist political alternative. My own campaign for the Ohio U.S. Senate seat in 2010 was one of a few rare exceptions. The Sawant and Moore campaign are a welcome development.

What Accounts for The Strong Showing?

Kshama's and Moore's strong showing in these elections is important because of the size and significance of the cities where they took place. Seattle has a population of 650,000 with 3.4 million in the metropolitan area, while Minneapolis has a population 400,000 with 3.3 million in its metropolitan area. Seattle is a major Pacific Rim city, tied economically to the U.S. West Coast, Canada, and Asia, while Minneapolis is a major economic hub of the Midwest, second only to Chicago. Consequently the socialists' strong showing in these cities is a matter of national significance.

Why did Sawant and Moore do so well? Both are personable individuals and well respected activists in their communities who built strong campaign organizations. Both candidates raised issues of concern not only to their local constituencies, but to the country as a whole. Sawant, for example, called for raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15, for taxes on millionaires and corporations to raise funds for jobs, education and social services, unionization of low-wage workers, affordable housing, an end to racial profiling and police brutality, a moratorium on deportations and citizenship rights for undocumented immigrants, and adequate funds for public schools with lower class sizes.

Sawant and Moore talked not only about immediate local issues, but also about the need to replace capitalism with socialism. Sawant's site declared, "The only solution is to fight to change this system, and replace the profit-driven, exploitative system of capitalism with a democratic socialist society. Join us in the struggle for a socialist alternative, to liberate the world from poverty, exploitation, and war."

One might speculate that the persistent economic and social crisis in the United States since the crash of 2008, accompanied by government austerity programs, has finally led to a political response. Certainly there are neighborhoods in both cities with high unemployment and hundreds of foreclosed homes, but Seattle and Minneapolis are not cities such as devastated Detroit. Both Minneapolis and Seattle have strong, diverse economies with unemployment and poverty rates far below the national average. Seattle's unemployment rate is only 4.7 percent, and so is that of Minneapolis, while the national unemployment rate is 7.2 percent, and Detroit has a rate of 18.8 percent. Seattle and Minneapolis, while they have their problems, are among the better-off American cities.

What then could account for the response the Socialist Alternative candidates received?

Demographics and culture play a role. Both Seattle and Minneapolis are both considered to be progressive cities that have a tolerant and liberal political culture. They also have diverse economies and growing high-tech industries that attract well educated young workers: a lot of geeks and nerds. Both cities made a recent CNBC list of cities most hospitable to young people because of their green spaces, their diversity, their entertainment venues, and "indy culture," that is, one encouraging to independent creative artist.

What the Sawant and Moore campaigns may reveal is that the economic and social crisis explain less about the success of their campaigns than the changing attitudes of younger Americans who have become more critical of government and the corporations, more open to racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, and more concerned about environmental issues and the quality of life for themselves and for others. What we may be witnessing is the development of working-class consciousness together with the development of an anti-capitalist counter-culture. We saw something similar in the 1970s when a radical social movement and a counter-cultural movement developed simultaneously. We hope that these developing trends find expression in more militant social movements and more such socialist political campaigns.

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