

Meet The Fist-Shaking Socialist Behind America's Highest Minimum Wage



This article is part of a Huffington Post series, on the occasion of the site's 10th anniversary, looking at some of the people and issues that will shape the world in the next decade. SEATTLE – On a recent afternoon in the city's Capitol Hill neighborhood, hundreds of

progressive protesters poured into a pavilion at Seattle University. The demonstration was loosely tied to Fight for \$15, the three-year-old, union-backed movement that has workers roiling the service sector with intermittent strikes and corporate shaming campaigns. The protesters were demanding union rights for the Jesuit school's stable of adjunct professors. When the microphone was passed to Kshama Sawant, a former adjunct herself who once taught economics in the building where the protesters now stood, the crowd erupted in cheers. The most visible figure in the local living wage movement here, Sawant, a native of India, became the first socialist elected to citywide office in Seattle in decades when she toppled a four-term incumbent in 2013. She quickly played a pivotal role in bringing about Seattle's \$15 minimum wage law, the most aggressive of its kind in any major U.S. city. According to Sawant, that \$15 minimum wage law marked the beginning of a broader social movement. Her message to the troops: Don't thank the Democratic establishment, the city's business leaders, the mayor's office or anyone in Seattle's ruling class for putting it on the books. "This did not happen because the government suddenly decided to care about workers," Sawant said, jabbing a forefinger for emphasis, as she likes to do on the stump. "We made it happen. We left them with no choice. They could either support us or be swept aside

into the dustbin of history. That is how it's going to be." In typical fashion, Sawant capped her remarks with a fist and the word "solidarity," setting off another round of raucous cheers. Once offstage, she grabbed a marker and created her own sign with which to join demonstrators: "I was an adjunct professor making poverty wages. \$15 for all workers!" Like Bill de Blasio in New York City and Marty Walsh in Boston, the 42-year-old Sawant rode into office on a tide of lefty populism, buoyed by the growing concern over income inequality in the U.S. Unlike those Democratic city leaders, Sawant does not fit neatly into the political establishment. She rose out of Seattle's Occupy movement and identifies as a member of Socialist Alternative, an anti-capitalist, democratic-socialist party. She sees meaningful policy change as something that grows out of the streets instead of city hall. With a few exceptions, Sawant views her own city council as generally in cahoots with the business and development elite. Staunchly anti-corporate and willing to shame colleagues, her council resume would not include the descriptors "consensus-builder" or "pragmatic deal-maker." In conversation, she tends to speak of city council in the third-person, as if she were still an outsider and not sitting in one of its nine seats. [coque telephone pas cher](#) But her ability to marshal fervent, populist support for issues like the minimum wage and affordable housing has pulled an already liberal council further in her direction. This, she said, was done against the council's will. "The whole council has moved to the left, but not because they want it, or because they secretly were wishing for this, but because they see the writing on the wall," Sawant said in an interview. "They see a movement developing in Seattle that they have to be held accountable to." Sawant will soon be held to account herself. She'll be running for council again this year, for either an at-large seat or the district seat she currently holds. She has already drawn a challenge for the district seat from Pamela Banks, president of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. Sawant's charisma and unbending progressivism may cut both ways for her: In a recent poll, she enjoyed the council's second-highest favorability rating, but also its highest unfavorability rating. Aside from the city's influential alternative weekly The Stranger, almost no established voices

carried a banner for Sawant in her first race, including labor unions. This year, her campaign senses a bullseye on its back, and it's eager to prove that Sawant's election was more than a coincidence of timing. As Clay Showalter, an aide to Sawant, put it, "The establishment is hell-bent on crushing us this time around." Sawant seems to agree that she's become a symbol of something. She's currently writing a book that, in a pre-publication listing on Amazon, once had the working title of *The Most Dangerous Woman in America*. (In a recent profile in the Seattle Times, Sawant said the title wasn't her idea and won't be used for the final product.) Her re-election efforts may ultimately determine whether the Occupy faction can successfully occupy elected office for more than a brief spell – without compromising its values, anyway. Sawant, for one, insisted it's now possible anywhere. "The most misleading message to take from our success in Seattle would be that this is somehow unique to Seattle, and that it can't be replicated elsewhere," she said.

A common knock is that Sawant may be too preoccupied with tackling the nation's One Percent to make sure the potholes get filled. And with a growing national profile – thanks in part to national news outlets that parachute into Seattle to interview her – there's also the question of Sawant's commitment to a career in her adopted city. (After getting her PhD in economics at North Carolina State University, she moved to Seattle in 2006 and recently bought a house in the city.) Her detractors say Sawant is too concerned with elevating the socialist cause. In announcing her challenge, Banks took a veiled swipe at Sawant for delivering a socialist rebuttal to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address – Sawant described Obama's as "a presidency that has betrayed the hopes of tens of millions of people" – and said a city council member can "solve more problems with a telephone than a megaphone." (Banks' camp didn't respond to HuffPost's request for an interview.) Though she isn't known for brokering deals on legislation, Sawant has been highly influential on the council, said David Rolf, president of Service Employees International Union 775, a powerful player in local politics. Rolf's union would seem a natural ally of Sawant. But it endorsed Sawant's opponent, incumbent Richard Conlin, back in 2013, when it seemed even Seattle wasn't ready for a socialist

lawmaker. This time around, four SEIU local unions, including Rolf's, have already declared their backing for Sawant. "What's primarily hers that's become law, you'd have to say it's not much," Rolf said. "But in terms of influencing a lot of bills and budget items, you'd have to say she's had a significant impact on the council. When she raises an issue, it pulls the body. The council may not vote for her version of a budget item, but it guarantees that thing will be debated, and the point of the policy will end up to the left of where it began. "People get a little afraid of looking like they are the voice of the far right in comparison," Rolf added. A prime example is the \$15 minimum wage, which Rolf's union and other SEIU affiliates laid the foundation for in Seattle and, earlier, in SeaTac, the suburb that encompasses the region's airport. In 2013, SeaTac voters made national news by narrowly approving a referendum jacking the minimum wage to \$15 in one swoop. Once elected, Sawant was poised to mobilize the masses and lead a Seattle ballot initiative along the lines of SeaTac's. Regardless of whether she had the organizational heft to pull it off, her threat was credible. Seattle businesses came to the bargaining table, where they would at least have a hand in the crafting of a bill. The version that passed, with newly elected Mayor Ed Murray playing lead broker, phases in a \$15 minimum wage in steps over the course of several years, depending on the size of the employer. Sawant opposed elements of the compromise that made it more palatable for businesses, like the longer phase-in period and a lower training wage allowed for minors. Michael Wells, head of the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce and a member of Murray's task force on the minimum wage, recalled Sawant supporters booing and shouting "shame" at the business-friendly provisions, even though employers were hashing out a historically progressive piece of legislation. "That was really difficult for me to stomach," said Wells, adding that his local chamber, which includes coffeeshop and bookstore owners, isn't exactly a bunch of right-wing fat cats. "It was so frustrating to me that we were so close to getting something done – a national model – and we were still getting attacked for being brutal capitalist monsters." But therein lies part of Sawant's effectiveness: By holding strong as the far-left flank, she moves the needle for what might be

considered compromise. Her principle can leave her as the odd member out in an 8-to-1 vote, as when she was alone in voting against the city's budget and confirmation of the police chief. But she sees shifting the debate as part of her job. "Ordinary people in Seattle are extremely progressive. But the reality is the council is nowhere as progressive as what people want," Sawant said. "The American public as a whole is well to the left of the entire gamut of the political establishment that we are presented with. These choices are so defunct – they are completely out of touch with the reality of what Americans want." Sawant's role as agitator-in-residence can create discomfort for her colleagues, including those who generally see themselves as being on the same team on big issues. Mike O'Brien, one of the more liberal Democrats on the council, was supporting fast-food workers long before it was fashionable, and he shares plenty of common ground with Sawant on environmental and economic matters. (O'Brien spoke to workers at Seattle University before Sawant, joking that he wouldn't want to follow her.) Even O'Brien said Sawant can make him squirm. "She's definitely a different legislator, and she makes me uncomfortable at times, often in ways that I don't necessarily appreciate at the moment," O'Brien said. "Sometimes she makes me uncomfortable and I think, You know what – that's not right. Other times she makes me uncomfortable and I think, I should be uncomfortable." According to O'Brien, the city council tends to be a congenial body, and win or lose, members don't go out of their way to reproach one another. Sawant doesn't necessarily adhere to that unspoken code, he said. [coque huawei pas cher](#) The dynamic is readily apparent in the council's official photo: all the members are smiling, save for Sawant, who appears braced for a fight. "Is she an effective legislator doing things the way the playbook says we do things around here? No," O'Brien said. "Is she getting things done in a way that a lot of folks couldn't get done? Yeah." In March, O'Brien joined Sawant in leading a council resolution condemning so-called fast-track authorization for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the mammoth trade deal being pursued by the White House and mostly Republican members of Congress. Progressive Democrats have torched the deal as secretive and bad for U.S. workers and the environment. Seeing as the president doesn't answer to Seattle

officials, the council's resolution was symbolic. But it turned out to be more local than it seemed. Ahead of the vote, a representative of Redmond-based Microsoft, one of the area's most powerful employers, pressed council members to ditch the resolution. It ended up passing 9-0 in front of a cheering crowd. Sawant said no corporations deserve a pass, regardless of what they might contribute to Seattle's economy. "It's important to make a distinction between the billionaire shareholders of these companies and the workers whose labor creates their profits," she said. [coque samsung pas cher](#)

Sawant hitched her 2013 campaign to the \$15 minimum wage movement. Her second act appears to be affordable housing, and rent control. Like in other desirable cities, low-income earners are feeling increasingly squeezed in Seattle's rental market. Sawant and one of her council colleagues, Nick Licata, co-hosted a town hall on the subject in late April, with hundreds of residents packing city hall to bemoan sky-high rents. [coque iphone occasion](#) One council member derided the event as "a political rally designed to inflame emotions and get one council member re-elected," clearly referencing Sawant. Rent control's heyday passed long ago in the U.S., with mainstream city leaders fretting that strong caps on rental rates will discourage developers from creating more units and, hence, more supply. The state of Washington has a ban on rent control; Sawant said it should be challenged. She proposes allowing landlords to raise rental rates according to the consumer price index, but not at "runaway" rates. She also has recommended that the city build more public-owned units to rent at below-market rates. Such propositions play well with the \$15-an-hour crowd that propelled Sawant into office. As Sawant marched to Seattle University with protesters, several residents approached her to egg her on in an affordable housing fight. "All of my money goes to rent," one man lamented. If the prospect of another Sawant term rattles the establishment, it should be less for her socialist ideas than for her connection with the disaffected. Sawant had barely wrapped up her speech in the Seattle University pavilion when she was asked to step outside and give a pep talk to workers who were about to get arrested in a call for higher wages. "But I just gave a speech," Sawant said with a laugh. She gamely hustled to the Capitol Hill streetcorner where 21

workers and activists were seated in a circle blocking traffic. (Sawant herself would not be getting arrested on this day – she was already facing disorderly conduct charges stemming from an act of civil disobedience at the headquarters of Alaska Airlines, which has been fighting SeaTac’s minimum wage law in court and has so far kept it from going into effect on airport grounds. The charges were dropped in April.) Sawant gave some words of encouragement to the workers, then shook hands and posed for photos with those who were destined for the police wagon. One of them was an airport worker named Michael Church. At 31 years old, Church makes \$9.50 per hour setting up ramps for major airlines at SeaTac. He commutes two hours each way on public transit and makes so little money that he has to live at his grandmother’s house. A few days after his arrest, a reporter asked Church what made him willing to be pulled off the street in handcuffs just to make a point. “My inspiration was Kshama Sawant,” Church responded. “She’s a politician. She could just collect a check and be like all the other politicians and not do anything. But with Kshama, she helps workers and people who are struggling with their rent.