

# 15 Now Conference Report

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On Saturday, April 26, some 400 activists and socialists gathered in Seattle to participate in the national "15 Now" conference. They came primarily from Seattle, but also from all over the country, including from as far away as Mobile, Alabama.



## Mood

The conference and Socialist Alternative's 15 Now campaign should be considered in its context. For decades now, there has been a general mood of resignation within the US working class – a feeling that nothing can be done to reverse the general course of things. This ranges from the most obvious issue of income levels and economic security to other issues like poisoning of the environment. In 2012, one of the first warning signs of a new movement sprang to life in the form of the Occupy movement. According to one person I talked with here (who is not a member of any socialist group), Socialist Alternative was really the only socialist group that was very present in Occupy Seattle and consistently sided with the left wing of that movement. Most prominent of the Socialist Alternative members in Occupy was Kshama Sawant, and that played an important role in Socialist Alternative and Sawant winning a base among the radicalized youth.

It is also clear that Sawant's election victory has helped the consciousness here in Seattle. For instance, I was in a coffee shop here and got to talking with a young mother sitting next to me. This was a pretty middle class woman, but she was definitely aware of Sawant (she liked her "passion") as well as the issue of the fifteen dollar minimum wage. She had some doubts about it, but those doubts were easily put to rest. (See this article.)

Although Socialist Alternative had been hoping for up to 1000 at the fifteen now conference, even 400 is not a bad outcome and would not have been possible had Sawant not won the election. (Probably close to 200 were Socialist Alternative members.)

## Involving Low Wage Workers

However, the conference also showed that the campaign has not really made any major headway in breaking into exactly that sector who most need a \$15 per hour minimum wage – single working parents, black and Latino youth, etc. From the outside, it is impossible to know for sure if this is because of the orientation of Socialist Alternative or because it is exactly these layers who feel the most depressed and abandoned. Whatever the reason, it must be admitted that the orientation and strategy of Socialist Alternative – who run "15 Now" – does not help.

## Mayor's "Income Inequality Advisory Committee"

Sawant was elected partly through the support of a layer of the union leadership. Several locals endorsed her and the majority of the delegates to the central labor council voted to give a joint endorsement to Sawant

and her opponent. Because her campaign for a \$15 per hour minimum wage for all and immediately really hit a nerve, the newly elected mayor was forced to appoint an "Income Inequality Advisory Committee" to study the issue of the minimum wage. This committee, however, was stacked in favor of big business, but it had as a co-chair David Rolf, head of the SEIU local in Seattle. Clearly, the intent of the committee was to suck in the union leadership to give them the appearance that they had some real influence – "a seat at the table" as they say. That is nothing new.

What was new was the presence of Sawant. How would she relate to this?

We don't know what she was doing for the first few months she was in office, but we do know that she had said she would try to "work with" the other city council members. What seems most likely is that this was coming from the union leadership. Although the composition of the committee made it clear that they would not come up with anything acceptable as far as a minimum wage proposal, Sawant and Socialist Alternative did not have a real strategy to combat them. The first mistake they made was to wait to file a ballot initiative until this late date. Even now, it was made clear at the conference that it was only filed to pressure the city council. *"To pressure the city council, the threat of a ballot initiative has to be credible,"* said Socialist Alternative leader Jess Spears. This sort of comment was repeated throughout the conference. Sawant, herself, said *"If the council doesn't do what 67% of their constituents want them to do, we'll take the charter amendment (the ballot initiative) to the voters."*

In fact, they went so far that they started sounding like the union leaders themselves. As one S. Alt. speaker, put it, *"We are here to pull the powers that be over to our side as working people."* As if those Corporate controlled politicians of the Democratic Party can ever be pulled over to the side of the working class!

There was one broad resolution that was offered to the conference that covered the purpose of the gathering. One controversy that arose about this resolution had to do with "small" businesses. The resolution defined "small" businesses as those with under 250 workers. They got this number from a city ordinance to do with requiring businesses to provide health care to their workers. There are some provisions made for smaller businesses, and 250 is a cut-off number, but not for small businesses; it's for medium-sized ones. According to Socialist Alternative leadership, special consideration has to be given to these "small" businesses in order to get the ballot initiative passed. Not living there, it's hard for me to judge, but I did have a short conversation the very next day with a woman who was concerned about small businesses. Within ten minutes I had her convinced that this concern wasn't justified. (See <http://oaklandsocialist.com/2014/04/27/conversation-in-a-seattle-coffee-shop/>.)

### **Collective Bargaining Opt-out (CBO)**

I think the real reason for this small business clause is different from what the Socialist Alternative leadership claims. This has to do with the other major controversy, which was around the "collective bargaining opt-out" (CBO) clause. What apparently happened was that the Hotel and Restaurant Employees union leadership (HERE) had come to Socialist Alternative and told them that they would oppose the ballot initiative if their members weren't excluded from the \$15 per hour minimum wage requirement. They claimed that the reason was that their members had "chosen" to get a fairly generous health care plan in place of a higher hourly wage. The implication was that if the hotels had to pay everybody the \$15 per hour minimum, then the workers would lose their generous health care plan.

An HERE staffer and two rank and file members came to the conference to make this case. What they never explained was why or how they would lose their health care plan - which they have under union contract - if the hotels had to pay everybody a minimum of \$15 per hour.

There are only two possible arguments to support this claim:

The first is that the hotels can't afford to pay all the union workers both. Statistics disprove this. The Hilton Hotel chain, for instance, saw an 18% increase in earnings per share last year, and had a total net income of \$415 million. On the other hand, only 10% of their union workers are paid less than \$15 per hour now! This means they would only have to increase the pay for this small number (about ten in total). The cost would be peanuts for the hotels. (Even if it were a significant cost, as a socialist - which Sawant says she is - we should say that if they can't afford a decent wage for us, then we can't afford them. That used to be the position of the predecessor to Socialist Alternative, anyway.)

#### **Power and Another "WTO Moment"**

The other possible argument for the CBO is that we don't have the power to force the hotels to pay both. But that is exactly the major purpose - supposedly - of getting a socialist elected into office: To help organize the power of the working class and to help workers see the real power they have.

The real fear here was expressed by the bosses' group that opposes 15 Now - the group called "One Seattle." They ran an article that talks about avoiding "another WTO (World Trade Organization) moment." That refers to the mass protests against the WTO in 1999 that basically shut Seattle down. From the point of view of all working class fighters, never mind socialists, we know that it's exactly that that we have to return to if we want to reverse the decades' long offensive of capitalism. But if there is any one group of people that fears "another WTO moment" more than the bosses, it's the union leaders. That's because they know that such a mass mobilization of workers and youth will lead to a situation where they will tend to lose control over their own membership, and they have survived in office for decades by exactly this control, by suppressing any union militants and convincing the members that the only thing we have to debate is the speed at which we move backwards, not the direction itself.

#### **65 Years Repressing the Mood**

The Socialist Alternative leadership made a lot of the fact that two rank and file members were asking us to grant this CBO. We were supposedly "standing with" the HERE rank and file, with the hotel workers, by doing this. But the union leadership has had 65 years of repressing any militancy among the membership. Of course, there will be some members who are convinced that we can't expect anything better in life. (There will also always be some members who are looking for a way to work their way up into the union hierarchy.) The job of working class fighters and socialists should be to counter this view of the union hierarchy, to struggle to convince workers that, yes, we can stop and reverse this bosses' offensive, that, yes, they can raise their pay and keep a decent benefit plan too.

It was here that Socialist Alternative and Kshama Sawant personally reached their lowest moment. Sawant was the final speaker on the issue, and she demanded and received extra time. It was clear that the only reason for this was her celebrity status, and basically her speech was a demagogic appeal to "stand by" our sister and brother hotel workers. She entirely failed to deal with any of the issues raised.

### **“Olive Branch” and Team Concept**

The real reason for the CBO is clear from the comments of the architect of them - David Rolf, president of an SEIU local in Seattle. It was he who pushed it through for the minimum wage ordinance at Sea Tac airport, and in an interview he first claimed that it was a matter of the democratic right of the members to "choose" benefits over wages. But anybody who has ever been involved in a contract struggle in a union knows that this "choice" is made with the massive pressure of the leadership, who make it clear that they will do everything they possibly can to block a real struggle for anything more. In reality, it's as free a choice as a woman "choosing" to submit to the sexual advances of her boss on pain of being fired. Rolf's second argument was that "we always want to offer an olive branch to employers of good conscience", meaning those who don't fight the union's ability to collect dues from the membership. This is simply the team concept - the idea that the union and the unionized employers are on the same team and the union has to help "their" employers compete with the non-union employers. This idea contradicts the very idea of having a union, and it is a disgrace for socialists to support it or the results of this idea in any way whatsoever.

Following strict "party lines", the vote came out to 186 - 72 in favor of the CBO. In other words, nearly half of those present did not vote.

A couple of other amendments were raised. One was to recognize the importance of standing against anti-women and anti-lgbt bigotry. This was tabled on the recommendation of the chair. Another was to recognize the importance of linking the fight for fifteen with the special needs of the most oppressed layers of the working class. This means opposing deportation of immigrant workers, for one. It also means supporting prisoner rights, in particular calling for them to be covered by any minimum wage ordinance, supporting union rights for prisoners, and opposing the psychological torture of solitary confinement. This is especially relevant since prisoners in Alabama are organizing to go on strike in May. This resolution was also tabled on the chair's recommendation.

There were also some other proposed changes in wording, which the leadership opposed on the grounds that it would mean delaying for three weeks getting a signature gathering campaign off the ground while these changes were filed. But they never explained why they were so concerned about this delay but not the delay caused by the CBO addition.

### **Socialist Alternative Strategy**

What are we to make of all of this? What is the strategy of the Socialist Alternative leadership? Why, for instance, if they were so concerned about the time they have to get the campaign going, did they delay until just a week or so ago filing the ballot initiative rather than filing it back in January?

The answer can be seen in the language that they use, especially one thing in particular: They continually talked about "labor" and "the unions" when in fact they were talking about the union leadership. This is typical of those on the left who refuse to come down squarely on the side of the rank and file in the gulf that divides them from this same leadership. When we spoke against the CBO, we pointed out that the ballot initiative could and should be used to help the rank and file organize to change their unions.

### **Building Union Opposition**

Take the example of the low wage union workers like workers at QFC, Albertson's, Safeway, etc.: All new

workers there start at \$9.42 per hour and courtesy clerks top out at \$9.52 per hour. For them a \$15 per hour minimum wage would mean a massive change for the better. Yet, disgracefully, the leadership of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW - their union) has refused to support the 15 Now campaign. That's because they are strict followers of the team concept. In opposing the CBO, we raised the idea of going into these supermarkets and leafletting the workers, urging them to organize to force their union to support 15 Now, not only in words (which in itself would be a step forward) but in deeds. This would include both mobilizing its membership in the campaign and making major financial donations for it. Through this, 15 Now could try to help the rank and file organize a wider campaign to change their union overall, including getting rid of this entire team concept, business union model.

Sad to say, this suggestion was completely ignored by the Socialist Alternative leadership. The reason they ignored it is that it's impossible to both help the membership organize to change their unions and keep "good relations" with the leadership. If they tried to help UFCW members organize, the HERE leadership and every single other union leadership would see this as a threat and would turn on them immediately.

One of the speakers really identified the overall problem: *"I don't think we should be thinking of influencing the city council,"* he said. *"I think we should be thinking of building a movement independent of the city council."* Among other things, he noted that "we only have one representative on the city council at this point." Socialist Alternative never tried to answer his point, meaning that they accept that how he identified the direction was correct.

Since Socialist Alternative has never oriented towards the Democrats, where does this orientation come from? It must be the union leadership. Just enough of them supported Sawant when she ran for city council to keep Socialist Alternative and Sawant from openly breaking from this leadership. This is the same leadership that follows the idea that workers and the employers are on the same team, both in the work place and in politics. This is the same leadership that has done everything it can to repress any hint of union militancy, any hint of a fighting spirit.

The Socialist Alternative leadership claims that winning a \$15 per hour minimum wage ordinance in Seattle will somehow magically transform the mood and raise the fighting spirit. This is their excuse for making one concession after another in order to try to win over the union leadership. But it doesn't seem to have transformed the mood at Sea-Tac – just the opposite if anything. It would be much better to use the minimum wage struggle to try to pry open the unions and encourage and help a layer of the rank and file to organize to change their unions – something that is impossible as long as Socialist Alternative is trying to make links with that leadership. It would be much better to spread the movement to draw in the most oppressed layers of the working class, including both undocumented immigrants and prisoners and their families.

Just imagine helping a few union workers start to build opposition caucuses inside their unions. Imagine making links between the immigrant youth who are blocking the deportation buses and union workers, making links between striking prisoners and their families and union workers. Imagine starting to build a real movement around these links.

Now that would really be an accomplishment!