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# VICTORY FOR \$15 IN SEATTLE

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## HOW SOCIALISTS BUILT A WINNING MOVEMENT

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# VICTORY FOR \$15 IN SEATTLE!



## HOW SOCIALISTS BUILT A WINNING MOVEMENT

*By Socialist Alternative*

Seattle is the first major city to pass a \$15/hr minimum wage. 100,000 workers will be lifted out of poverty and millions will be inspired all over the country and around the world.

On June 2nd Seattle's City Council voted unanimously to raise the city's minimum wage to \$15/hr. Starting April 1, 2015 all workers in big businesses like McDonald's, Starbucks, Macy's and Target will see an immediate increase to \$11 an hour and by 2025 all workers will be making a minimum of \$18 an hour.

Altogether it is estimated that Seattle businesses will have to pay their workers an additional \$3 billion in wages over the next ten years! This demonstrates that "struggle pays," that ordinary people can take on the biggest corporations in the world and win, when we organize and fight back.

Now is your chance to be part of this struggle. Help us build the socialist movement as the backbone for rebuilding the labor movement and creating a new mass party of and for the 99%. Join Socialist Alternative!

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## A SOCIALIST ELECTED TO CITY COUNCIL

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The movement of fast food workers, inspired by Occupy, put \$15 on the agenda across the country. This received a boost in Seattle when the labor movement successfully won a \$15 ballot initiative last November in SeaTac, a small town outside Seattle. But it was the election of Socialist Alternative candidate Kshama Sawant last fall that was decisive in creating an unstoppable political momentum for \$15 in Seattle. Sawant ran on a bold platform of \$15, creating a major debate throughout Seattle, and won with almost 100,000 votes in November 2013.

“Sawant’s ascendancy has shown that being a socialist is no longer a liability in running for public office. More importantly, the \$15-an-hour campaign has nurtured a model of grassroots democracy that challenges the corporate-controlled political process. Observers expect the bill to pass by the end of May. If it passes, the win — though imperfect — will validate Socialist Alternative’s approach, swell its ranks and crack open more space for socialist politics in the United States.” -Arun Gupta on *Al Jazeera America*, “*Learning from a Socialist in Seattle*,” May 21, 2014

Just as important as winning the election was how Sawant and her party, Socialist Alternative, used the platform of her city council seat. Unlike the typical establishment politicians, Sawant used her position as a city councilmember and the big media spotlight on her to build a powerful movement from below.

Shortly after the November election Sawant and Socialist Alternative launched the campaign 15 Now to keep the pressure high. 15 Now set up 11 action groups in neighborhoods across the city mobilizing in the streets and at public forums. Critically, through the Action Groups and democratic conferences 15 Now offered activists the opportunity to have ownership over the fight for \$15.

Through her public position Kshama Sawant was able to counter the propaganda in the corporate media and expose big businesses attempts to water down \$15 and hide behind the concerns of small business.

# SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE



Socialist Alternative is the organization that spearheaded the campaign to elect Kshama Sawant to Seattle City Council, the first independent socialist elected in a major U.S. city in decades. We are a national organization fighting in our workplaces, communities, and campuses against the exploitation and injustices people face every day. We are community activists fighting against budget cuts in public services; we are activists campaigning for a \$15/hour minimum wage and fighting, democratic unions; we are people of all colors speaking out against racism and attacks on immigrants, students organizing against tuition hikes and war, women and men fighting sexism and homophobia.

We believe the Republicans and Democrats are both parties of big business, and we are campaigning to build an independent, alternative party of workers and young people to fight for the interests of the millions, not the millionaires.

We see the global capitalist system as the root cause of the economic crisis, poverty, discrimination, war, and environmental destruction. As capitalism moves deeper into crisis, a new generation of workers and youth must join together to take the top 500 corporations into public ownership under democratic control to end the ruling elites’ global competition for profits and power.

We believe the dictatorships that existed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were perversions of what socialism is really about. We are for democratic socialism where ordinary people will have control over our daily lives.

Socialist Alternative is also in political solidarity with the Committee for a Workers’ International, a worldwide socialist organization in 47 countries, on every continent. Join us!

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**GO TO [WWW.SOCIALISTALTERNATIVE.ORG](http://WWW.SOCIALISTALTERNATIVE.ORG) TO GET INVOLVED**

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fast food strikes have played an important role in drawing attention to the issue of poverty wages, but the movement could be much stronger if the unions ended their reliance on the Democratic Party and looked to mobilize the full power of working people through building democratic mass movements.

Over the last three decades, labor's strategy of trying to appease big business to get some concessions only increased the demands of Corporate America. It's time to drop this futile effort.

And we must remember that no reform is guaranteed under capitalism. Big business could challenge what's won in Seattle with a referendum or other means so our movement must be prepared to mobilize and defend what we've won.

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## JOIN THE SOCIALISTS

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"In the end", wrote Arun Iyatury and Rebecca Smith for CNN.com, "the outcome in Seattle demonstrates what history has proved time and time again: When workers are well-organized and there is broad support for higher wages, even businesses that resist the idea are ultimately forced to pay more." (5/15/2014)

Socialist Alternative supports every possible reform that can be won in a capitalist system. The fight for 15 has shown that when we organize we can win. Now is the time to build 15 Now across the country. To find or start a 15 Now chapter in your area go to [www.15Now.org](http://www.15Now.org).

But this fight has also shown that under a system based on profits, big business will always fight tooth and nail to defend their wealth and power. Capitalism is by its nature grossly unequal. The fight for better wages, education, healthcare, housing, environment and social justice in general must also be a struggle for the socialist transformation of society, based on genuine equality and human need.

The task is great, but the time is right. Join Socialist Alternative today! Go to [www.SocialistAlternative.org](http://www.SocialistAlternative.org) to sign-up to get involved and/or donate.



Against the claims of some that electoral politics only serves to co-opt movement, we showed how elected office can be used to build and strengthen them. Socialist Alternative together with 15 Now and labor built enough pressure from below to force big business into conceding \$15, an historic achievement.

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## INDEPENDENT PARTY NEEDED TO REPRESENT WORKERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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It was the movement of working people and socialists that brought \$15 to the table, but it was the Democratic Party who brought big business to the table to water it down.

Initially all the Democratic Party politicians in Seattle opposed the demand for \$15. But given the huge public support that was developing the two Democrats running for Mayor both came out in favor of \$15 in September 2013. After winning the November election, Mayor Ed Murray said he supported \$15 but wanted to do it in a way "that would work for business too."

Murray set up an Advisory Committee of business and labor leaders (but mainly business) to negotiate a compromise. The business and political establishments recognized that there was no stopping \$15, but they used the process to insert a number of corporate loopholes like a delayed phase-in over many years. Business also fought until the final days of the city council process to water the bill down further. At

the last minute Democratic Party representatives moved to change the implementation date until April next year and include a sub-minimum teenager and training wage.

15 Now and Socialist Alternative organized to get rid of these corporate loopholes right up until the final vote. We organized rallies and spoke out against these gifts to business at every opportunity. Councilmember Kshama Sawant moved multiple resolutions to strengthen the bill in favor of workers and remove the corporate loopholes. Despite mass support for Sawant's proposals, the Democratic Party councilmembers – including "Left" Democrats – demonstrated their allegiance to business and disdain for the movement that brought \$15 to the fore by voting down each of Sawant's amendments.

This demonstrates the reality that while the Democratic Party uses more progressive rhetoric than the Republicans, fundamentally both parties work to serve the interests of big business. While a single socialist on the Seattle City Council was able to build a movement to win \$15 in less than a year, the Democratic Party politicians worked to make the \$15 as pro-business as possible. On a national level, the Democrats have failed to seriously organize and fight for \$10.10. Instead they are using it as an electoral gimmick for the 2014 elections.

That is why Socialist Alternative argues, as we did in Kshama's election campaign, that working people need our own political alternative to the Democratic and Republican parties. Given the huge alienation with Congress, the mistrust in politicians and the need to defend working class families, there is a unique opportunity opening up to build a new party for working people.

The work of Kshama Sawant and Socialist Alternative has demonstrated



that it is possible to build an independent political voice to challenge the two parties of big business. Kshama's and Socialist Alternative's success can be spread. It's up to you to become a part of that effort.

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## A FIGHTING STRATEGY FOR LABOR

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While Seattle has won the highest minimum wage in the country, business was able to weaken the \$15 minimum in a number of ways. There are unreasonable delays of 3 to 10 years for the \$15 to be fully implemented (depending on the size of the business you work for), and a tip penalty and healthcare deduction were added for the first 10 years.

This was not inevitable. Over the past 6 months Socialist Alternative has energetically engaged in a debate within the labor movement about what would be the best strategy. We urge union members, activists and leaders to review the experience of this struggle, discuss with us, and draw a balance sheet of what are the lessons going forward.

In our view the strategy of those leading the main labor unions was not focused on building the movement from below but instead oriented towards the Mayor's process of negotiating with business. They believed this was necessary because labor could not win in a direct and open clash with big business.

After decades of setbacks it is understandable that the self-confidence of the working class is low. However, Socialist Alternative argued the debate about \$15 was a enormous opportunity to try and mobilize new layers of workers into a movement, which would bring more pressure to bear and is a critical way for a new generation to gain experience organizing, learn political lessons and in this way begin to rebuild the workers' movement.

It was in that context that we argued for putting forward a ballot initiative for a strong \$15. If the big unions had backed the threat of a ballot initiative for a stronger \$15, business could have been forced to concede much more. Collecting 100,000 signatures to put it on the ballot would also be an organizing and educational opportunity to reach broad layers of workers with clear answers to the anti-worker arguments of business and the media (for a long phase-in, for tip penalty, etc).

Labor unions in the U.S. have tremendous resources and political weight. They have millions of dollars and millions of members that could be mobilized behind a bold campaign to raise the minimum wage. The