Socialist Alternative and its candidate Kshama Sawant recently secured an historic victory as Sawant became the first openly socialist candidate elected to a major city council anywhere in the USA for decades. As reported in the last edition of Socialist Lawyer, Kshama Sawant was making waves in Seattle as her election programme included raising the minimum wage, rent control on housing, and calling for raised taxes on millionaires to fund transit, education and other public services.

That basic programme resonated with people and shifted the debate. During her campaign, she condemned economic inequality, the ongoing recovery from the recession, and a downtown building boom which is only benefiting the super rich. The Seattle Times reported on 26th October 2013 that: ‘The election isn’t for 10 days but we can already declare the big winner in Seattle. It’s the socialist… What’s most notable about Seattle politics this year is that nearly [Sawant’s] entire agenda has over the course of the campaign, been embraced by both candidates for mayor’.

That endorsement by other candidates was an acknowledgement that the campaign that Socialist Alternative had waged was successful. The Seattle Times had dismissed Sawant’s campaign as ‘too hard left’ for Seattle.

Hundreds of volunteers flocked to support the campaign. It even split the local Democratic Party structures, with many of their more radical members coming over to support Sawant. Significantly the trade union movement, traditional supporters of the Democratic Party, swung behind Sawant.

Since her election Kshama Sawant has been the focus of national media coverage appearing on TV, press and radio. Her election has lit up the left and progressive movements in the USA. It has popularised socialist ideas and has further exposed the Democratic politicians as only interested in satisfying the needs of big business. The election, while only small, is significant as it shows that it is possible to succeed on an openly socialist platform aimed at improving the living standards of the working class.

The onslaught of neo-liberalism and the crushing of the living standards of people globally cry out for a united socialist response. In the USA of all places, it shows us what is possible.

Such was the enthusiasm, that when Sawant was inaugurated into office, thousands of people turned up to a packed Seattle City Hall. Her inauguration speech was something special. Sawant took the opportunity to set out her priorities: ‘I will do my utmost to represent the disenfranchised and the excluded, the poor and the oppressed, by fighting for a $15-an-hour minimum wage, affordable housing, and taxing the super-rich for a massive expansion of public transit and education’.

To the waiting media, who had come in their hundreds, from local and national media outlets across America, she stated boldly: ‘I wear the badge of socialist with honour’.

Paul Heron