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By Genevieve Leigh
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Socialist Alternative town hall injects racial politics into COVID-19 pandemic

Socialist Alternative held an online meeting Sunday under the title “Coronavirus Wreaks Havoc: Socialist Response.” The event was hosted by Kshama Sawant, a leader of the organization and Seattle City Council member.

Ten guest speakers participated in the broadcast, including two prominent members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—New York State Senator Julia Salazar and Mike Sylvester, a Maine state representative. Also taking part were Black Lives Matter activist Shaun King and various local union officials.

The event was an attempt to cover over the conventional Democratic Party politics of Socialist Alternative and the DSA with anti-capitalist rhetoric and empty slogans. This was combined with the foul injection of racial politics, a hallmark of the Democratic Party.



Kshama Sawant (Photo: Seattle City Council)

Sawant presented herself as the most “radical” speaker on the panel, calling for a freeze on all rent and mortgage payments, the organization of a rent strike, immediate cash assistance to replace lost wages and the nationalization of the banks and corporations, among other demands.

However, the real character of Socialist Alternative’s politics came at the end of her remarks. She concluded with: “One last thing I would like to say, and this is to Senator Bernie Sanders: Bernie don’t drop out. Don’t endorse Joe Biden.”

Socialist Alternative is, in fact, little more than an electoral auxiliary of the Sanders campaign. Sanders’ role has been to convince workers and youth to support the Democratic Party, a right-wing capitalist party, and Socialist Alternative has worked to convince them to support Sanders.

In 2016, after dissolving itself into an electoral campaign for Sanders, it claimed to oppose Sanders’ support for Clinton and declared that his “political revolution” had to go on without him. Four years later, it did the same thing, covering up for Sanders’ own pro-imperialist positions and doing what it could to encourage young people to support Sanders and the Democratic Party.

The organization is now in crisis over Sanders’ winding down of his campaign. Despite Sawant’s urgings, Sanders is clearly preparing to drop out. As he has made clear from the beginning of his campaign, he will support former Vice President Joe Biden or whichever other right-wing politician the Democratic Party ends up selecting as its nominee.

At the same moment that Sawant was making her plea, Sanders was hosting his own online event on the coronavirus crisis with Democratic Party congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. Neither Sanders nor his guests even mentioned his candidacy for the Democratic nomination.

In his remarks, Sanders said he did not “want to be partisan” because everyone had to come together to address the pandemic. While criticizing aspects of the bipartisan boondoggle to the corporations that was at that point passing through Congress, Sanders said nothing about the responsibility of the capitalist system for the crisis. None of the panelists uttered the words “capitalism” or “socialism.”

The reactionary role of Socialist Alternative, the DSA, et. al. in seeking to block a genuine movement of the working class for socialism was perhaps most clearly revealed in the comments by Shaun King, a Black Lives Matter activist who was heavily involved in campaigning for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

King was brought in to inject racial politics into the discussion of the pandemic. He began by asserting that “communities of color have been hit the hardest by this pandemic.” He continued: “The role of racism and white supremacist systems is really central to the impact that the coronavirus is having for so many reasons...

“What we see is the role of whiteness and skin privilege even in what this bailout package is going to be.”

What does the phony concepts of “skin privilege” and “whiteness” have to do with the coronavirus pandemic? Millions of workers, black and white, of all ethnicities and nationalities, are already suffering immensely from this crisis. The virus respects no borders and does not discriminate by race, religion or gender.

The policy of governments, led by the United States, has been directed at utilizing the crisis to advance the interests of the ruling class, not “whiteness” or “skin privilege.” It makes no difference to the ruling class if those who die are black or white, women or men, gay or straight—so long as the stock market soars and workers are forced back to work to make profits for the rich.

To justify his reactionary racist narrative, King made the absurd claim: “When I have to go out and get groceries in my neighborhood and all over Brooklyn, I hardly see any white people in grocery stores working, in the food service industry working. When I see UPS workers, postal workers... They are again unproportionally black and Latino.”

The assertions made by King are not only outright lies, they are politically filthy and dangerous conceptions made in the service of the ruling class.

The racist politics of King is the politics of the Democratic Party, utilized to divide the working class and advance the interests of privileged sections of the upper middle class, competing for access to positions of power and affluence in academia, corporate boardrooms, the state and the trade union apparatus.

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare with unprecedented acuteness the fundamental class divisions in society and the urgent need for the working class to unite as an international class to demand measures to save lives and defend the living standards of working people.

As the working class enters into struggle to advance its interests, it must and will sweep aside the Democratic Party and racist politics of organizations like Socialist Alternative.

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