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**Kshama Sawant and Capitalism’s Shock Absorbers**

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*“While you waitin’ for the mention in the pages of ‘The Stranger’*

*You can find me in the basement makin’ heaters for later…*

*we’ve been living in conditions we’re tired of*

*Come on and rise up”*

*- Blue Scholars, “North by Northwest”*

**Intro: the shifting political terrain**

The years since the financial crisis have not been boring, especially here on the West Coast. Through  strikes, occupations, demonstrations, and blockades, tens of thousands of us have created social possibilities with few precedents in recent history.  However, all of these developments are fragile; we will forget what we’ve learned unless we keep putting it into practice.  We need to stay dynamic, dodging the new obstacles that the system will encourage us to put in our own way.

An increasingly hollowed out state apparatus is having a harder time coopting street-level turbulence using the old carrots and sticks.  The capitalist ruling class is finding itself unable to forge a consensus among its own members about how to stablize the system.  This is both a cause, and an effect, of the actions we have engaged in here, and the rebellions that are breaking out around the world.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/images.jpeg)This shifting political terrain has made it possible for Kshama Sawant to win her recent election to Seattle city council.

**But what does all of this mean for those of us who want to end capitalism altogether?  What does it mean for those of us who want to nurture the fragile blooming of autonomy, communistic creativity, and direct democracy that has begun to emerge over the past few years?**

**Sawant’s election was only possible because the old systemic shock absorbers have worn thin and the ruling class has not yet reached consensus about how to build new ones.  However, they are hard at work on this project, and we need to strike strategically against their prototypes as they try to build them.**

If we want to do this, we will need to go much farther and deeper than Kshama’s campaign has gone (footnote 1).  To facilitate that, I suggest we revisit some of the moments in the Decolonize/ Occupy  movement that gave birth to her campaign in the first place (footnote 2).   These moments are some of the horizons  the next movement will need to exceed if it wants to remain un-cooptable.

This kind of analysis is not a matter of abstract political commentary.  My goal is to make sense of the day-to-day political climate here in Seattle, a climate that may be emerging in other cities as well.

The day before Kshama’s opponent conceded the election, I was food shopping, and as I was checking out I chatted with the teller.  Recently, he’s been talking about  blue collar rebellion and was pissed that his union leadership just botched a potential strike.  He knows I’m a member of [Seattle Solidarity Network](http://seasol.net), which he respects because we fight  bosses who don’t pay their workers, and we don’t ask any lawyers or union officials for permission.  The minute I walked into the store, he shouted “Did you hear about Sawant? Looks like the king is dead”.   He explained how he sees Sawant and Seasol as alternatives to the failed strategies his union has been pursuing.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/seattle_skyline_at_night-wide.jpg)This is the political climate in Seattle right now – people casually debate the merits of socialist and anarchist strategies in our daily lives. As a teacher, I walk into class some mornings and my students are discussing  demonstrations they saw on the news the night before, demonstrations I couldn’t make it out to because I was busy organizing other demonstrations for the following week.

In a situation like this, where do we focus our limited energies?  Here in the emerald city, there are a lot of glimmering political possibilities, but many of them could turn out to be empty spectacles.  We need to choose carefully.  But those careful choices we make may (at first) seem dangerously reckless –  even to our friends, coworkers and neighbors who are beginning to consider themselves anti-capitalists.

**Demoralized radicals lost among all this restlessness**

Kshama’s election seems to be disorienting or frustrating many of us whose actions have helped catalyze the development of this new climate.  A lot of people who went through Decolonize/Occupy Seattle with Sawant seem to have nothing to say about her election besides sarcastic jokes,  crass personal attacks on her, or abstract denunciations of electoral politics.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/jq_pd-300x232.jpg)My comrades’ skepticism about electoral politics is certainly warranted. We’ve had to cultivate an anarchistic distrust of all politicians in order to accomplish what we have accomplished the past few years.  We’re used to politicians like Jean Quan in Oakland trying to stop us.  We’re used to dealing with the [Rainbow Coalition](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/04/26/reflections_antipolice_seattle/) of former Leftists who sold out and became Democratic Party operatives, invoking their movement credentials to justify repressing our direct actions.

These soft-Lefties mobilize grassroots [armies of nonprofit](http://advancethestruggle.wordpress.com/2009/07/15/justice-for-oscar-grant-a-lost-opportunity/) and union bureaucrats to stand with their backs to the police and their faces to our crowds.  They tell us to go home, to stay calm, and to air our grievances through the proper channels.

We’re used to dealing with politicians and [progressive media outlets](http://tidesofflame.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/open-letter-to-dominic-holden/) that paint us as outside agitators, or as violent criminals, justifying police brutality and state surveillance against us in the heat of the moment, then claiming our work as their own once we are successful.

After dealing with this shit over and over again, it’s no surprise that many of us have begun to sympathize with the anarchist call to [burn the bridges](http://pugetsoundanarchists.org/content/burning-bridges-they-are-building-anarchist-strategies-against-police-puget-sound-winter) these misleaders are trying to build with “the community”.  We have seen first-hand how these bridges are usually constructed for the propose of smuggling trojan horses into any dynamic movement.

This arsenal of co-optation was deployed against the Oscar Grant rebellions in Oakland, and against the uncompromising trajectories of the Decolonize/ Occupy  movement in Oakland, Portland, and Seattle. This is what we think of when we hear about electoral politics.

In Decolonize/ Occupy Seattle in particular, we were [constantly on the lookout](http://insurgentnotes.com/2012/01/guest-article-the-radicalization-of-decolonizeoccupy-seattle/) for democratic party operatives and opportunists who tried repeatedly – and [unsuccessfully](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/10/26/democrat/) – to coopt the movement.

And here’s the strange, new thing: Kshama Sawant was not one of those operatives or opportunists.  In fact, early on in the movement, Sawant and I worked together, alongside hundreds of radicals, socialists, anarchists, and others who tried to prevent Mayor McGinn and the Democratic Party from containing the energy that was exploding in the camp and on the streets – I’ll tell that story below.

In fact, Sawant emerged out of a faction that many of us saw as an unlikely place for a new politician to start a career.

I think our experiences during those heated months in the fall of 2011 shed light on why Kshama’s campaign has been so successful – they highlight the fact that tens of thousands of people share our desire for autonomy from corporate party politics and they saw her as a symbol of this stubborn independence.

However, they also illuminate how the state and it’s co-optation mechanism are changing, and how we need to adapt if we want to continue to push the limits like we’ve been doing the past few years.  Future co-optation attempts might not just come from the Democrats,  and they might not come in the forms we’ve seen in recent years.

But before I get into that, I’d like to do a quick detour to flesh out the deeper and more long term-bases for why many of us are skeptical about electoral politics.

**Socialism is not a political party; it is the first stage of communization**

Part of the genius of the Decolonize/ Occupy movement was our instinctual sense that the state can’t really control the capitalist market.  In fact, the state helped create this market by colonial force and it has now been devoured up by the forces it unleashed.

Instead of appealing to politicians to reel in capitalism and make it work for us, we tried to attack capital directly – we  occupied Wall St. and  ”Wall St. on the Waterfront”.   As we said during the [Dec. 12th, 2011 port shutdown](https://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2012/01/30/longview-occupy-and-beyond-rank-and-file-and-the-89-unite-2/), the Wisconsin-style attempts to occupy capitol buildings had failed to stop the politicians from passing austerity measures.  So why not start occupying the capital of the corporations that buy the politicians in those capitols?  Why not disrupt their ports, factories, etc.?  This could be the first step of a broader effort – where employed workers, unemployed folks, union members and non-union alike could unite to occupy and seize the means of life – the farms, rail lines, schools, grain elevators, etc. that we need to survive and thrive.

As I argue below, existing capitalist states are so hollowed out and dysfunctional that they can barely control the market enough to keep capitalism functioning smoothly.   So it seems utopian to expect them to control the market enough to redistribute wealth equally, or to avert ecological catastrophe.

I think this means the capitalist state cannot be reformed to gradually become more and more socialist; they tried that in Europe, and it failed.  All the so-called “socialist” parties there are imposing austerity measures, gutting things like free education and health care.  They tried it in various countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, and they either ended up in debt-bondage to the IMF, imposing austerity on their own people –  or they were isolated, invaded, and overthrown.

Without an accelerating revolutionary movement in the streets, workplaces, and neighborhoods, I think that Sawant will be pressured into one of these corners.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/001.jpg)

I’m not saying we should abstain from politics in order to focus on building subcultures that “drop out” of the system.  These subcultures often end up reproducing oppressive and capitalistic social relationships themselves.  And without taking back all the wealth we’ve created through our labor, we won’t have enough resources to actually meet each other’s needs and desires.  Everything the state and the corporations have we made; we may want to destroy the nuclear weapons and surveillance systems and other aspects of control, but we can probably recycle the machinery, distribution networks,  buildings, etc.

Some Leninist supporters of Sawant might agree the state can’t be reformed through elections, but they might see her election as a strategic step toward popularizing a party that can eventually overthrow it by force.  But if we look at the 20th century, I think we need to be honest about the dangers of professional political classes, even progressive ones created by insurgent vanguard parties or guerrilla armies.  They’ve consolidated power on the backs of the workers, citizens, peasants, or whoever else they claim to serve.  They’ve also imposed state-capitalist economic plans that have pushed the planet further toward climate catastrophe.

I’m particularly skeptical of attempts to take over a state like the U.S.A., whose roots are in the colonial settler republic of the 1700s and whose branches spread as an increasingly incoherent coordinating committee for the global capitalist empire; in fact, its roots and branches don’t always work well together, pushing this state into increasing contradictions like the recent government shutdown.  It will probably take a world revolution to bring down this state, and if that becomes possible, I hope we aim a lot farther than the creation of a Soviet States of America.

 I think a revolution will need to thoroughly smash this capitalist state and this empire, immediately starting a long-term process of communization: creating what we need and want, freely producing for each other.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/images1.jpeg) Socialism is simply the word that Marx used for certain [initial attempts at communization](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/04/03/beyond-cooperatives-and-fair-trade-marxs-critique-of-the-gotha-program/), for the moment when the workers’ movement begins to take over and the working class begins to abolish itself as a class, unleashing our pent up creative powers to build a classless society.  This is a contingent, reversible moment where people either continue to make the revolution or allow it degenerate into state capitalism. Or, they fail entirely and a  wave of [fascist rebels](http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/books/fascism.html)  or [warlords start filling the vacuum](http://kersplebedeb.com/posts/thinking-about-warlordism/).

We have to admit that none of us can really guarantee the success of  this communization process – especially if it has to happen under conditions of  rising sea levels, pandemics, food insecurity, the proliferation of drug cartels,  etc.  If we had these answers, “communization ” would be debated in occupied factories right now, not in graduate school bars and suffocating, navel-gazing “ultraleft”, “left communist”,  and anarchist scenes.  We are not sure how to avoid the fates which have swamped so many past revolutions.  But that’s exactly what we need to figure out.

 I think we can learn from the emphasis on direct democracy  that many anarchist and indigenous movements have implemented-  face to face decision making about what we want to create, about how we want to reorganize our society in ecological ways, or how we want our kids’ to learn and grow.

**Breaking the System’s Shock Absorbers**

However, I think we can also learn from the autonomist Marxists’ recognition that the current capitalist state is not monolithic or static.  The state is the product of contradictory class forces, and since classes are constantly being composed and recomposed, the state can change and adapt, especially in response to pressures from below –  from people like us.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/capitalism_firm_grip_on_wheel.jpg)Capitalism and the state are currently in a moment of crisis and transition.  They are having trouble governing.  This does not automatically mean that revolution is around the corner, and even if revolution happens this does not automatically mean the outcome will be anarchistic communization.  But we need to recognize that the current state has its own set of problems, and that our enemies are not always united in some [grand conspiracy.](http://overthrowingilluminati.wordpress.com)

Local and federal governments are allowing various corporations or ruling class factions to prioritize their own short term profits rather than investing in captalism’s longterm stability.  We see this especially with the investments in trains carrying coal for export, instead of high speed passenger trains that could start to replace cars.  We see it in the destablization of public education which allows various crackpot social entrepeneurs to market new products to “save” the system even while their products harm youth and make it more difficult to train the next generation of workers for the system.

We also see this tendency when companies replace workers with machines, even though this eventually causes their rates of profit to fall and creates a potentially rebellious population of unemployed people.   We may see it in drastic form if the Trans Pacific Partnership is passed,  reinforcing multinational corproations’ ability to sue local governments that try to regulate them.  This could close off a whole range of reformist political strategies such as lobbying,  petitioning, collective bargaining.  Why lobby someone who doesn’t have the power to give you what you want?

 All of this  leaves the state and ruling class with less leeway to reproduce the illusion they represent some social contract or common good.  That reality is both a cause, and an effect, of the creative rebellions that are happening here, and, more intensely, around the world.

“Grassroots” groups like unions, nonprofits, etc. that used to be locked into stable relationships with the state  may increasingly find themselves having to freelance.  This creates a new political terrain and we will need to learn to navigate it.

We will find ourselves betrayed, isolated, and crushed if we don’t remain independent of Sawant and the progressive union bureaucrats and social entrepreneurs who backed  her election.  But we will also find ourselves isolated and crushed if we abstain from future Occupy-like movements just because the last one produced a new socialist politician.

I’m noticing a number of my comrades are trying to maintain their anarchist credentials by flippantly dismissing Kshama as just another progressive Democrat.  I think they’re bending facts to fit their dogmas.  It is obvious that Sawant is sincere about fighting the corporate-controlled Democratic party machine; this is evident in her call to seize the Boeing factories and to put them under democratic workers’ control, and in her refusal to take corporate donations.   But breaking from the Democrats alone is not enough to replace capitalism and the state with total freedom, and it creates new problems for us at the same time as it solves old ones.  We can’t solve the new ones by claiming Sawant is just an old one.

We need to remember that the corporate status quo is not maintained solely by the two parties of the 1%.  In fact, it isn’t maintained solely by the state bureaucracy.  It is a product of social relationships that run throughout society – relationships that are continually reproduced and reinforced  by hierarchal “grassroots” organizations like unions, nonprofits, religious groups, and activist groups.  These shock-absorbers channel rebellious energy into safe cul-de-sacs where it won’t threaten the stability of the system.

The state doesn’t simply rule through brute force – if it tried to crush every oppositional movement, this would just piss people off even more and we’d rise up to overthrow it.  I know the grand juries and all the killer cops can make it seem this way, but I doubt we are on the verge of martial law or general suppression of all radical activity.  The state still rules through hegemony and counterinsurgency – through winning the hearts and minds of potential opponents, rendering them a loyal opposition.  Some radicals call this tendency [“social democracy”](http://warforquadranttwo.wordpress.com/2013/11/01/joint-kshama/).

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/kanye-no-church-in-the-wild.jpg)I’m not saying there is some grand conspiracy going on to brainwash us.  Hegemony is always partial, tentative, contradictory, and dynamic.  If  the state aimed for total mind control it would become corny, obvious, and easier to mock.  Usually it’s more subtle, and actually relies on everyday people creating new forms of incomplete rebellion ourselves, forms that can then set trends, allowing the system to market new, “edgy” commodities we can consume to blow off steam – everything from Kanye West’s appropriation of Black Block imagery to the corrosive proliferation of academic postmodernism through anarchist and activist subcultures.

Also, not all of these cooptation efforts are centrally coordinated and calibrated to effectively maintain the stability of capital as a whole.  Again, some of them are simply efforts of various factions of capital to make a short term profit, and at times these short term motives will actually undermine overall capitalist stability by popularizing a culture of rebellion (e.g. movies like Elysium or the Hunger Games).

Other times, they undermine the overall hegemony by coopting a movement in a  clunky way that is effective enough to avoid short term profit loss but not effective enough to prevent people from drawing radical conclusions over the long haul.  Still other times, they attempt to directly make a profit off of people’s grievances, such as all the corporate education reform movements that promote Pearson, Inc.’s standardized  testing products as a phony solution to the very real  racialized inequality between Black students and white students in the public schools.

The most classic forms of hegemony are patriarchy and white supremacy – things like the sexual violence in the Occupy camp that fractured the movement,  or the failure of majority white longshore workers in Seattle to support the majority African port truckers when they went on strike here in 2012. These are not just imposed from above; we re-generate them in how we relate to each other on a daily basis.  The system convinces us to internalize the shock absorbers that allow capitalism to run right over our antagonistic gestures.  When we see this happening, we shouldn’t fall into an abyss of guilt and conclude that we’ve failed and that no alternative is possible.  All of this is part of living in a capitalist society, and we’re not exempt from it just because we’re radicals.  But that’s also exactly why we want to destory capitalism.  Race and gender oppression are social constructions, and like any construction site, they can be sabotaged.

For capitalism’s hegemony to work, the people who build the shock absorbers actually need a bit of leeway, breathing room to experiment at the grassroots level.  Not every nonprofit worker or union organizer is a conscious social democratic hack.  Some of them might be sincere revolutionaries, and others might just be good people trying to help out their neighbors.  But at the macro level, these institutions operate by intertwining these good intentions with the constraints set by the system.  In times of crisis, otherwise good people from these milieus are  recruited into action to rapidly generate peace treaties that de-escalate struggles between the oppressed and the oppressors, the ruling class and the working class, the state and the ungovernable crowd. At that point, they become our opponents. 

So, what all of this means is that if  we want freedom beyond the two party system, we’ll need more than militant action in the streets. We’ll also need more than socialists in office.  You can’t smash  a social relationship like people smash windows.  You also can’t vote it out of office.

We’ll need to break through these shock absorbers in a strategic and thorough way -and it will be a messy, impure process since the shock absorbers are intertwined with our daily lives and our very sense of who we are – so breaking through them is as much an act of social self-creation as it is an act of destructive transcendence.  If we don’t do that, then any Leftward shift among elected politicians will remain largely symbolic and hollow, and militant actions in the streets will be easily isolated and contained.

In Seattle, the Democratic Party would have lost control back in the ‘60s or earlier if it hadn’t forged a mutual alliance with shock absorbing institutions like nonprofits, identity-based activist organizations, and unions. Sawant represents a break from the Democrats. But does she represent an erosion of these more diffuse forces of hegemony, or is she going to reinforce them in new ways?

**Opposing the Dictatorship of the Dumpies**

Kshama  has cultivated an edgy charisma based in the radical role she played in Occupy Seattle. Occupy was certainly a moment where everyday people started to shock the system by acting in unpredictably rebellious ways, and for a few months the system could not contain it. It wasn’t the first time that’s happened, and it won’t be the last.  Kshama worked with many of us to help defend that dynamism, but as I will argue below, she only went so far, and future movements will need to go a lot farther.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/pict25.jpg)In the early days of Decolonize/ Occupy Seattle, the police had torn down our tents at Westlake but people refused to leave, sleeping out overnight on the concrete in the rain with nothing but tarps and sleeping bags.   Every time the cops tried to clear us out of the park, angry people would swarm them and block their maneuvers, so instead they resorted to prison-guard tactics, shining lights in our eyes, trying to keep us up all night, trying to provoke us to get irritated with each other.  The backbone and nerve center of the movement those nights were the houseless youth who absolutely refused to leave.  For some of them, Westlake was their home before all of the the downwardly mobile urban professionals (dumpies) started showing up.

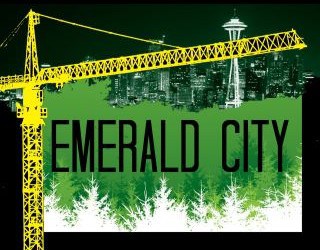
[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/office-space-employees-smashing-printer.jpeg)Those dumpies are people who imagine themselves as part of the Seattle’s world-famous “creative class” of educated, progressive professionals.  The problem is, the 2008 economic crisis dumped them out of their American dreams.   Instead of moving up the food chain at Microsoft or wherever, they were thrown into the working class, disoriented and confused.  Some of them found themselves sleeping next to the homeless youth at the Occupy camp, ready to fight together for a life worth living.  They became comrades.

Unfortunately, other dumpies thought that their managerial skills and education entitled them to run the movement.  If they couldn’t make their mark as part of the creative class, they could make it here in the streets as social entrepreneurs.

I was part of a core of several hundred people in the movement who constantly had to challenge these dumpies’ attempts to manage the movement in general, and the homeless youth in particular.  We confronted them when they tried to call the cops on homeless youth for smoking weed,  or when one of them insisted we make general assembly decisions via an iphone app he was marketing (as if everyone has an iphone!).

Since then, some of those dumpies have gone on to staff various union, nonprofit, and activist efforts, solidifying Seattle’s civic image as a bastion of progressivism, and reinforcing some of it’s systemic shock absorbers.

During the height of the occupation, some of those people naively thought they could work with the Mayor’s office to cut a deal legitimizing the movement  in the eyes of the city’s leaders.  Mayor McGinn came down to the camp bringing coffee one day.  He also offered space at City Hall if the camp were to move there, vacating the Westlake location where we were disrupting business and generally tarnishing the city’s image as a safe place to invest.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/emerald-city-320x250.jpg)We were sending a clear message: we are the people who keep the emerald city running, who serve its coffee, care for its elderly and infants, and carry its baggage.  Only now we were squatting in it’s core, throwing all of the social decay that eats at us right back into the faces of the city’s elites.  The mayor kept insisting “don’t pay attention to the people behind the curtain”, but we were unavoidable.

We knew that was our strength, and if we moved to City Hall, we would lose it.  People were attracted to Occupy because we did what was necessary to fight against the 1%; we didn’t bend to what was considered possible or acceptable by the stale, or by the timid political class who had failed to prevent the economic crisis in the first place.

So, instead of moving to City Hall, we helped organize the Night of 500 tents at Westlake  and the eventual move to Seattle Central Community college, where the camp remained a hub of wildly independent, anti-systemic activity.

Sawant and her party were part of both of those moves, and she worked closely with anarchists and other socialists at those moments.  All of this helped shift the political conversation leftward; what was first seen as impractically radical became the new normal.

Those of us who opposed working with the Democrats won out in several other political battles, some of which Sawant was a part of, and some of which she abstained from.  For example, folks in the people of color caucus [prevented Democrat county councilman Larry Gossett](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/10/26/democrat/) from using their event as a platform for his party politics.  Nick Licata and other Democratic Party bigwigs hosted an Occupy event at Town Hall where they were trying to steer the movement into two- party electoral politics.  Several of comrades from the movement had been invited to speak on the panel with Licata, the head of the state labor council, and other big-wigs.  Instead of articulating vague populist politics that could be steered and shaped by the professionals, they took a clear and decisive stance defending the movement’s independence from the party and from the political and legal constraints of the current system.  In retaliation, for the next 6 months the Stranger and other progressive mouthpieces kept attacking us as out of control, too toxic to touch, unable to work with our “natural allies”.

As far as I remember, Kshama supported all of that, and during the first few months of the movement she never denounced us for being too radical.

I’m not saying her track record in Occupy was one of unbounded revolutionary glory. Some claim she functioned as a figurehead in the general assemblies without putting in enough work to actually carry out the decisions she would propose.  I hear where people are coming from, since there was a split between mental and manual labor on the movement.   But I think this criticism is overblown since  Kshama put in roughly the same amount of  work as hundreds of other people who claim the movement as part of their biographies.  Not everyone had the capacity to live in the camp 24/7 or be at every work group meeting.  If everyone else in that situation can claim to be movement veterans, why can’t she?

More importantly, I’d like to question the notion that someone only has a right to speak about the movement if they sacrificed their life energy doing work for the movement.  This is a recipe for burnout, and, more ominously, it can play into authoritarian suppression of critical thinking.  Finally, don’t we want to abolish alienated labor?  If so, that means creating ways of getting things done that don’t involve guilt tripping individuals into doing more than they are wiling to do.

Kshama’s party, Socialist Alternative,  did put pressure on me to play a  figurehead role alongside her, representing “the radicals” in the General Assemblies because they thought we both had sway with the movement.  I though this would undermine our efforts to build up a horizontal movement with multiple voices. I firmly declined and explained that I’d be more effective acting collaboratively, rotating through multiple roles, and encouraging other comrades to rotate in and out of the spotlight.

But the key point here is that Sawant is not lying when she said she was a part of the movement, and that she fought the Democrats within it.

**The Shock Absorbers Recalibrate a bit to the Left**

I don’t think Kshama’s campaign would have been possible if we all hadn’t risked political marginalization in order to defend Occupy Seattle from being swallowed into the Democratic party.  That kind of swallowing is exactly what happened in other cities where activists were more cautious.  We created a “new normal” in this city precisely because we were so out of control.

A segment of progressives who usually trail the left wing of the Democratic party started brainstorming how to operate in this new environment, and it seems like some of them are starting to grope toward the possible formation of a 3rd party, or at least a kind of Left-wing Tea Party inside/ outside approach.

I think that’s the story behind why the Stranger, some trade unions, and other forces that originally opposed Decolonize/ Occupy Seattle’s fierce independence are now supporting Sawant even though they denounced her when she was out in the streets with us.  They are tentatively open to “socialist” independence from the Democrats, promoting a kind of “militant reformism” that I will analyze below.

 If this is an accurate assessment of the situation, it means they will probably end up offering  support not only to Sawant, but also to more of us if we want to play ball.  For example, check out the Stranger’s [recent article](http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/the-smartest-people-in-seattle-politics/Content?oid=18203654) where they listed Seasol on their list of the “smartest people in Seattle politics”, the people who are actually driving policy forward.   Again, all of this opens up as many problems as it solves.

**The Port Shutdown, the Unions, and Sawant’s Party**

In the face of this flattery, we should all keep in mind that we had to risk loosing support from these forces during Occupy in order to achieve what we did, and we’ll have to do it again.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/rise.jpeg)

port shutdown in Seattle

The [port shutdown](https://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2012/01/30/longview-occupy-and-beyond-rank-and-file-and-the-89-unite-2/) of Dec 12th, 2011 is  a key horizon in this regard.   Decolonize/Occupy Seattle blockaded all container traffic in and out of the port on that day, in retaliation for the state repression of the Occupy camps, in opposition to austerity budget cuts, and in support of  port truck drivers.  This was part of a West Coast port shutdown that disrupted Wall St. on the Waterfront.  It brought the Occupy movement closer to rank and file workers who were fighting against corporate tyranny in Longview, WA, in the farms of E. Washington, and in short-haul trucking up and down the coast.

The international bureaucracy of the ILWU, the longshore union, opposed the action, out of fear it might bring down legal repression on them, and out of concern that we were challenging their turf.  The media picked up on this to spread all sorts of distortions about our plans and intentions.

We were attacked not only in the mainstream media, but also in the progressive and socialist presses.  We pulled it off anyway.  Without any support from labor bureaucrats or nonprofits leaders, we rallied the rank and file members of various unions, rank and file nonprofit workers, hip hop artists like Geo from the Blue Scholars, and many others.

All of them joined the backbone of the movement who were pushing it all forward: the precarious children of the Great Recession, folks who work in service industries,  who are unemployed or underemployed, who hate the fact that they are exploited on the job but don’t necessarily identify with the old labor movement and its affirmation of what it means to be a worker.  These are many of the same people who are now fighting bosses and landlords through [Seasol](http://seasol.net),  who are fighting deportations in [Who You Callin Illegal](http://whoillegalseattle.wordpress.com), or who are organizing on their jobs for a 15/hr minimum wage.

Through this, thousands of participants in the port shutdown gained a sense of confidence in our ability to create ruptures –  new situations previously deemed politically impossible.  We learned we are capable of organizing significant, large, well-coordinated actions and campaigns without the support of the shock absorbers and their organizations.

Despite their earlier defense of the movement’s independence, Sawant’s organization, Socialist Alternative, did not learn this lesson fully.  Instead, they let themselves get disoriented by all the attacks against us in both the mainstream and the socialist press.   In their own [newspaper](http://www.socialistalternative.org/news/article10.php?id=1741), Social Alternative affirmed that we were right to go ahead with the action despite the opposition from the union leadership, but they criticized us for not trying to coordinate the action with union leaders.  This shows a lack of understanding of the real-time dynamics of the action.  If we had tried to organize this in conjunction with the unions, the union leadership would have shut it down before it got off the ground.   (For more on that, see [this article](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2012/01/30/longview-occupy-and-beyond-rank-and-file-and-the-89-unite-2/) and the comments in [this one](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2012/12/31/struggles-on-the-waterfront/)).

This makes me wonder, does Socialist Alternative fully understand the limitations of the “progressive” bureaucratic forces that have since swung into action to support Sawant’s campaign?    Their stance on the port shutdown seems to show an openness to the seductive appeal of these organizations: the claim that they can somehow help us reach and mobilize millions of people if we just moderate our message and our actions enough to “meet people where they’re at.”

In reality, these organizations often do not know where people are at.  They are often out of touch with their own social base, and they actually need us in order to mobilize people for their own ends – which is why they are even talking with us in the first place.

**The unions and the demand for $15/ hr**

**[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/1238821_517387551676210_1438772175_n-sm_a.jpg)**The core demand fueling Sawant’s campaign is the call for a 15/ hr minimum wage in the city.  This is something I support, because it is a struggle that workers themselves are fighting for, not simply an abstract leftist slogan raised to make a didactic point.   However, winning it will probably require escalating strikes, blockades, occupations, and other illegal and semi-legal actions at a scale even larger than the port shutdown.

Sawant would probably agree with that statement.  But the question remains: how do build that kind of momentum?  Will the union bureaucracies do it, or will they get in the way?

As we learned during Occupy, large numbers of people only take risks like that if they are able to generate, spread, and shape the action themselves.  People don’t like to be stage-managed in scripted demonstrations, especially when our lives and our freedom are at stake.  And that logic of independent growth-through-struggle doesn’t mesh well with the logic of city hall politics, even socialist politics.  It also doesn’t mesh well with the bureaucratic nature of most unions.

To be clear, I am not siding with the corporate anti-union forces, who I am [fighting as a teacher.](http://creativitynotcontrol.wordpress.com/2013/02/28/in-the-wake-of-the-testing-boycott-a-10-point-proposal-for-teacher-self-organization/)  I’m also not polemicizing against organization here, nor am I worshipping short term flash-in-the pan direct action without a strategy. I just think that workers’ self- organization is held back by the current array of labor laws and the unions that obey and reinforce them.

When workers set clear goals for ourselves, we will certainly build various kinds of formal and informal organizations to sustain our activity toward these goals over time, and we will certainly debate and execute various strategies.   But resilient, dynamic, and emergent organization in the era of horizontal mass communication requires an open-source proliferation of self-organization – not top-down, rigid bureaucratic structure.  People need to be able to take an idea, a strategy, or an action, make it their own, adapt it as needed, and run with it; they then need to be able to assess the successes and failures of these efforts so others can learn from this and can evolve.

I would wager that most people simply will not join something risky and difficult if they do not have this freedom, which is why I think that most existing unions and socialist political party organizations are outdated. You can’t just mobile people like chess pieces; that might work when you win a few exciting victories, but eventually the honeymoon effect wears off.  People need to be able to mobilize and organize themselves.  And when that happens, all sorts of seemingly impossible scenarios can become realities.

We’ll need that kind of dynamic in order to win the 15/hr min wage, to stop the coal trains, to stop racist suspensions in the public schools, to stop deportations, to shut down the county’s plans for a new 210 million youth jail, or to do any of the other things we want to do.  This is a fact that the Stranger and other “creative class” supporters of Sawant miss, because they are ignoring the recent history of this city – a history they failed to make because they were too busy sniping at us from the sidelines.

They are also ignoring basic facts about the political economy of this region that indicate how hard some corporations will fight to prevent the emergence of things like a 15/hr wage. The economic boom here in Seattle is fragile and brittle, just like the capitalist system as a whole.  It is based on the exploitation of low-wage precarious workers, and the racism that undergirds this,  just like the capitalist system as a whole. And the corporate leaders will fight hard to keep it that way.

The relative economic boom here is NOT fueled by a highly educated stratum of knowledge workers – that’s precisely the kind of Clintonian mirage that the 2008 crisis should have dispelled.  Demanding a living wage will not automatically elevate more people into the so-called creative class.  Not everyone is going to start working at Starbucks for 15 bucks /hr  while they save up to go to UW and start their career at Microsoft or Amazon.  In reality, they’ll be competing for that restaurant job with recent UW grads  or older dumpies who can’t find work elsewhere.

Low wage workers keep the floors swept and the packages moving at Amazon and Microsoft.  They also keep the tech workers fed, clothed, and housed relatively cheaply, allowing these tech workers‘ own employers to pay them relatively little to support a “competitive” standard of living in this supposedly livable city.

If low wage workers start to demand higher wages, the corporations that exploit them will threaten to move out of the city, like Boeing is doing because its own workers are refusing to be pushed down into the ranks of the precarious workforce.  Or, the creative class will have to pay more for their lattes and Priuses and they’ll start to move to the Bay Area, creating a labor shortage at Microsoft, Amazon, etc. which could make it easier for the tech workers who remain to demand more autonomy and control on the job without getting fired – a kind of Office Space rebellion.

So if we really want a living wage in Seattle, we need to build a movement that is prepared to occupy corporate businesses to prevent them from leaving, coupled with direct material solidarity with workers in other places around the country and around the world who the corporations are trying to move to exploit.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/bringthemhome.jpg)That kind of movement for 15/ hr could be sparked by the sleeping giant that is currently waking up: the communities of folks who are undocumented and unafraid, many of whom are also working in low-wage industries like food service.  Across the continent, undocumented youth are starting to take militant action independent from the Democratic Party.  Groups like the [National Immigrant Youth Alliance](https://www.facebook.com/NationalImmigrantYouthAlliance)  are infiltrating and organizing inside detention centers, and they are doing actions at the border against detentions.

If these folks end up taking the lead in a movement against low wages and deportations,   it might look less like a polite conversation about socialism in a Seattle Starbucks and  more like the old school movement for the 8 hour workday (the movement that gave birth to May Day), or the  IWW timber and shipyard strikes that culminated in the 1919 Seattle General Strike.

But that’s precisely when all of the contradictions will reach a breaking point.   I just don’t see the SEIU or UFCW union leadership being okay with any of that, nor do I see the Stranger endorsing it.  If the unions were to organize in ways that encourage that kind of self-mobilization, it could easily get out of their control.  People might demand more than simply a wage increase and SEIU union recognition under the existing labor laws – they might start organizing against capitalist control itself, like what has started to happen in labor and anti-austerity insurrections in other countries.  This would also create a political crisis for the ruling class because they’d have to choose between their “liberal” / “social justice” credentials and their commitment to maintaining a favorable investment climate here.

So if SEIU and the Stranger decide they’re  going to try to reign in workers’ autonomy, or other insurrectionary moments that might emerge, what would Sawant do?

She might decide that she is going to break with these forces, and  with the other progressives who support them uncritically.  After all, members of her campaign have told me that the unions didn’t even want to fight for the 15/hr demand that hard, and that her campaign pushed them on this.  Maybe Sawant will do more than simply propose living wage ordinances.  She might even do more than getting symbolically arrested in some stage-managed civil disobedience on a picket line, where the cops and the SEIU leadership coordinate ahead of time to make sure everything goes according to plan.   She might encourage rank and file workers to go all-out, letting them know that she will back them even if the union leaders bail on them, even if they break the law, even if they determine their own strategy without her party’s input, even if they threaten to alienate all of the well-placed social entrepreneurs who backed her campaign.

But her party’s stance on the 2011  Port Shutdown, and their lack of clarity on the role of the trade union bureaucrats in the Occupy movement leave me unwilling to assume she will do all of that simply because she is a socialist.  So I think we should prepare to do it ourselves –  with her, without her, or against her.

**Revolutionary growth vs. militant reformism**

Kshama is right though: something IS changing in Seattle.  There has been enough independent, rebellious energy the past few years that socialist organizations, trade union and nonprofit leaders, and progressive journalists are talking about riding the wave of rebellion instead of trying to just contain it like Jean Quan did in Oakland.  They’re becoming more flexible.  The ethos of the progressive nonprofit worker , the progressive trade union staffer, and the class struggle anarchist  are starting to merge into a new  type of activism – what some call  [“venture syndicalism”](http://libcom.org/library/venture-syndicalism-can-reviving-strike-revive-mass-unionization).

We will probably see more and more of this.  Unions like SEIU will take lessons from Seasol and will start taking action outside of the framework of collective bargaining and the constraints of union recognition elections under the National Labor Relations board.  Politicians like Sawant will get arrested, maybe even at rebellious, ungovernable demonstrations.

But the question remains:  what does success really look like in these actions?  For militant reformists, success looks like winning specific policy changes, like the 15/hr minimum wage, by any means necessary.  It is Saul Alinskyism on steroids: everything is about the win.   “By any means” might involve breaking the law, but it might also involve sacrificing the growth and self-activity of movement participants at the altar of short-term tactical efficiency, the execution of strategy decided upon by centralized movement leaders.

For people who want to create a revolutionary new society, success looks like learning through struggle.  It looks like building up the confidence, capacity, and collective wisdom of the millions of people who we hope will eventually bring down capitalism, starting with ourselves and those around us.  For us, every strike, every blockade, every occupation, every uprising is successful if it catalyzes the emergence of an intelligent, dynamic, unstoppably appealing multitude of people.  It is successful if it helps us become the kind of people who have the confidence and knowledge necessary to reverse the climate catastrophe, to build direct democracy in every workplace school and neighborhood, to create to meet each others needs, not corporate profits.

**Where to start?**

How do we relate our immediate actions to these long-term goals?

One thing we can do is to start creating our own media networks that can narrate our own struggles without relying on the corporate media or the mainstream “progressive” opinion makers like the Stranger.  I’m not talking about some stale Leninist paper that looks like it was written in 1917 or 1971.  I mean something that learns the lessons of hip hop – something that is beautiful, that communicates in multiple registers at once, that remixes past discourses into new syntheses, and that appeals to millions.

I think efforts like [Hip Hop Occupies](http://hiphopoccupies.blogspot.com), [Tides of Flame](http://tidesofflame.wordpress.com), [Creativity Not Control](http://creativitynotcontrol.wordpress.com), the [Seattle Community Media Lab](http://s-c-medialab.org), [High Gods Entertainment](http://www.youtube.com/user/highgodsentertainmen),   [All Power to the Positive](http://allpowertothepositive.podomatic.com), the [W.I.S.H. Plan A zine](http://nonewyouthjail.wordpress.com/plan-a-an-abolitionist-zine/), and Christy X’s [new movie](https://www.facebook.com/events/627005507364183/628917863839614/?notif_t=like) about our comrade Dede’s struggle against deportation are good experiments moving in this direction, but we’ve got a long way to go.

If we develop media networks then we will have something tangible to offer when we meet groups of people who are active in various struggles – against coal trains, deportations, suspensions, abuse on the job, etc.  We can connect with those “[militant minorities](http://sketchythoughts.blogspot.com/2009/09/lenin-leninism-and-some-leftovers.html)”, or “[intermediate layers](http://miamiautonomyandsolidarity.wordpress.com/2010/11/24/the-intermediate-level-analysis/)”, the groups of people within each of these struggles who want to go further than the shock absorbers within the struggle would allow, and can put our media at their disposal.  We’ll find new comrades and build new communities with these folks, in ways that break out of the stifling, narrow activist scenes, without falling into vague and demoralizing hype about moderating our message in order to “meet the masses where they’re at”.

We can support the efforts of these “intermediate” groupings/ tendencies, mobilizing our own networks to combine with theirs when appropriate, helping them convince the majority of the people in these struggles to break through the shock absorbers holding them -and all of us -back.

[We don’t need to teach people to strike](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2012/03/20/dramatic-intro-the-crisis-of-the-left-whats-really-going-in-the-iso-boc-debate/), to occupy, or to demonstrate – more and more people who we’ve never met are doing this more and more often.  With the rise of militant reformism, direct action might become commonplace.

While direct action is almost always better than polite rallies and petitions, we need to keep in mind that there is nothing automatically revolutionary about it.   We should participate in these struggles for sure.  But instead of working ourselves to death trying to substitute our activity for the activity of millions by amping up our own intensity to win demands,  we should focus our energies on  breaking through those shock absorbers so that more and more people can unleash their own creative, rebellious energy  - so that there will be more of “us”, and eventually we will no longer be a militant minority, but will become the majority.

Of course, a  key part of this should involve organizing our own campaigns in ways that are bottom-up, direct democratic, based in direct action, and independent from the politicians.  Groups like [Seasol](http://seasol.net), [Who You Callin Illegal](http://whoillegalseattle.wordpress.com), the [More4Mann coalition](http://more4mann.blogspot.com), and [Washington Incarceration Stops Here](http://nonewyouthjail.wordpress.com) are good examples of this, and they inspire others to take up similar types of organizing, formally and informally.  These struggles share important skills, like how to make collective decisions under pressure, how to work through differences with each other in comradely ways, etc. – skills that all of us need to develop further if we want to become resilient and dynamic enough to overthrow the system.

**The biggest danger of the Sawant campaign is that the people who would otherwise be doing all of this might start trying to take shortcuts, thinking that you can simply project demands like 15/hr through political and mainstream media campaigns, and then workers will respond to your call and will start fighting for it.**

I have no personal hostility to Sawant. Maybe that means I’m condemned to anarchist hell by the  gods of insurrection.  But she hasn’t tried to stop me and my comrades from doing what we want to do- at least not yet.  If she does, we’ll have to  break through the obstacles she creates.  If she doesn’t, then I’m not interested in  wasting energy calling her out just for the sake of reaffirming abstract anarchist principles.  I’d rather focus on putting the principle of autonomy into actual, physical practice.   We all knew Kshama  was a pro-electoral socialist when we first met her – why is everyone acting so surprised that she is not for the immediate destruction of the bourgeois state?

That being said, I am worried that comrades will get disoriented and will stop doing what needs to be done, putting their energies into supporting future socialist campaigns instead of building up our independent capacities to make a revolution.  Since capitalism already chews up most of our lives through paid and unpaid labor, we have preciously little time and energy left over when we clock out , and I hope we put it towards activities that will develop all of our capacities over the long haul.  Without getting big headed about it,  we need to remember that all the hype around “Seattle Socialism” would not even exist if we hadn’t been out here doing our thing all these years.

[](http://blackorchidcollective.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/pink-bloc-banner.jpeg)By the height of the Occupy movement, the most popular chants in the streets became “Everything for everyone, the revolution has begun” and “politicians, we don’t need ‘em, all we want is total freedom”.  It was this fierce independence that gave birth to the Kshama Sawant moment.

So when the election  honeymoon is over, what are we going to do next?  I know that a bunch of us will stay in the streets, the neighborhoods, the schools, and the workplaces fighting shoulder to shoulder, and learning how to make a revolution.  I hope you join us and refuse to leave, whether the Stranger and the new socialist(s) at city hall praise us, or whether they attack us as dangerous dreamers.  If it comes to that, just keep in mind that we already redefined politics in this city once, and we can do it again.

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1) Unless I specify otherwise, when I say “we” in this piece, I am not referring to any of the specific organizations, tendencies, or circles I’m a part of; I’m referring to the tens of thousands of people who have taken actions over the past few years that have pushed beyond activist business-as-usual.

2) When I say “Decolonize / Occupy ” I am not referring to a specific tendency within the movement; in Seattle, many radicals [used this term to refer to the entire movement](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/decolonize-occupy/) and to the process of creative rebellion in general; it signified our desire to align ourselves with the anti-colonial struggles being waged by indigenous peoples here and across the continent.

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[**Some healthcare organizing resources**](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2013/09/22/healthcare_resources/)

Posted on [September 22, 2013](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2013/09/22/healthcare_resources/) by [jomo206](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/author/jomo206/)

Some folks in NYC are organizing around with healthcare workers around hospital closures and mergers. See their fliers and updates [here](http://florencejohnstoncollective.wordpress.com/)

A few years ago, some of us in were doing work in nursing homes and [organizing](http://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/10/06/caring-a-labor-on-stolen-time/) around staffing ratios and overwork. Here are some of the resources we compiled collectively which we thought would help us articulate a disabilities justice, feminist and class struggle politics wrt healthcare struggles.

It is a work in progress and a little dated so please add to it by commenting below.We are particularly interested in current blogs that have writings by healthcare workers and patients.

It would be dope to read and discuss some of these together to build a revolutionary praxis around health care organizing.