**Report - Panel on Socialists and Electoral Campaigns at Brecht Forum – January 16, 2014**

This was the advertisement for the event:

**Socialism at the Ballot Box**A conversation with:  
- Alan Akrivos, [Socialist Alternative](https://www.facebook.com/SocialistAlternativeUSA)  
- Jennifer Roesch, [International Socialist Organization](https://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Socialist-Organization/122646921103159)  
- Bhaskar Sunkara, editor and publisher of [Jacobin Magazine](https://www.facebook.com/jacobinmag)  
- John Halle (moderator), former Green Party alderman, New Haven, CT  
  
The 2013 municipal elections offered a few signs of hope for the Left. In Seattle, Kshama Sawant won a City Council seat as an avowed socialist, while fellow Socialist Alternative candidate Ty Moore finished a close second in Minneapolis. Here in New York, Bill de Blasio's election reflects a leftward shift in the electorate.  
  
What opportunities exist for socialists in New York electoral politics? Should socialists run for office? How should local socialists orient towards the Democratic, Working Families, and Green parties? What can socialist elected officials do to aid extra-electoral movements? Can electoral politics serve to unite the fragmented elements of the post-Occupy left?  
-----  
@ The Brecht Forum, 388 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY  
Free for Brecht Forum subscribers  
Sliding scale, $6/$10/$15 for non-subscribers; nobody turned away

**The Report**

The event was attended by about 100 people, overwhelmingly white men. There were about 10 women present, only one or two African Americans, and two or three other persons of color. There were many people above the age of 55 and many people below the age of 30. There were a number of SA and ISO members, a couple DSA folks, *New* Politics board members, and many independents. There were three Solidarity members (Dan LB, Sherry B and Nate F). The panelists were all well spoken and the talks highly political; the crowd was very attentive and enthusiastic. While there were some questions and doubts, there were no antagonistic speakers. The felling was one of a sense of solidarity among leftists in claiming a victory for all of us. The meeting began promptly at 7:00 p.m. and ended at 9:30 p.m.

**Alan Akrivos of Socialist Alternative** was the first speaker and spent most of his time putting the Seattle election where Kshama Sawant won city-wide with 95,000 votes and the Minneapolis election where Ty Moore came within 200 votes of winning into the context. He located the election in terms of the world crisis of capitalism, the workers’ movements in the Arab Spring, the European strikes against austerity, and movements in Africa and Asia, especially Thailand an India. He mentioned in Latin America in particular the spectacular 1.4 million votes recently won by the Trotskyists in Latin America. He argued that the crisis had created divisions within capitalism and mentioned the new Pope and his statement son economic inequality. There is, said Akrivos, an ideological crisis evolving on a world scale as a result of the crisis and these struggles.

Turning to the United States he talked about the Occupy movement which he said had shifted the tectonic plates of American politics, look back as well to the Wisconsin protests at the Capital in Madison, the Occupy Oakland port shutdowns, and the current low-wage worker movements. He put the Sawant victory in Seattle in the broader context of other elections: the Lorain, Ohio labor unionists who recently ran their own independent slate, the Chokwe Lumumba campaign in Jackson, Mississippi which identified with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, union support for Howie Hawkins’ campaign, the big vote for de Blasio in NYC and Martin Walsh in Boston. He also mentioned the [Dan La Botz campaign in Ohio](http://newpol.org/content/socialist-campaign-ohio). In passing, Akrivos called the audience’s attention to the “despicable” role played by the Working Family’s Party in the attack on Howie Hawkins campaign.

Alan Akrivos made the argument that there was a turn to politics because other avenues of change had been blocked off. Industrial struggles, that is, strikes were not happening because union leaders prevented them. Street protest had stopped because of the use of the police to repress the Occupy movement. Learning to his surprise that his time was up Akrivos concluded that socialists need to be confident and audacious and to put up their own candidates where they have strong local bases and strong organization.

**Jennifer Roesch of the International Socialist Organization** began by congratulating Khsama Sawant and Socialist Alternative on their successful campaign in Seattle. She said that that campaign had transformed the political landscape. Roesch said it allowed us to be proud to be socialist. She agreed with Alan on his overview of the international situation.

Roesch explained that the ISO’s general approach was that they were not opposed to election campaigns but on the other hand they did not participate in all election campaigns. They tried to determine criteria for the use of the limited resources. One criterion was that the campaigns were to the left of the Democratic Party. For example, they had supported Ralph Nader’s 2000 campaign because he seemed to be giving expression to the Global Justice Movement which had erupted at the Battle of Seattle in 1999. Roesch said that there were many possible alternative political expressions. She mentioned the Chicago Teachers Union’s recent resolution to explore independent political candidates.

Roesch said that we are living at a time of increasing class discontent and growing impoverishment. She argued for the importance of the low-wage works campaigns, the fight for the $15 minimum wage. She said that Sawant’s campaign showed that the working class was rejecting the current situation.

Roesch disagreed with Akrivos’ argument that the blockage of other avenues of struggle had led to the shift toward independent political action. She argued that electoral action was another front together with the social and labor struggles. She said that we have to look for the lessons within the defeats. For example at Boeing where Sawant spoke about taking over the plant, the workers had been blackmailed, but that had led to the formation of an opposition group in the plant, so that showed people drawing the lesson.

We have to build a broader challenge, said Roesch, and that will take more frequent cooperation among left groups. The left has to look for broader forms of action.

She agreed that de Blasio reflects a shift in the consciousness of the working class, but he is not anti-Wall Street. Look at his hiring of Bratton and his failure to commit to pay the lost wage increases of the union contracts. How do we begin to build a left alliance for the next four years in New York. We have to also think statewide and we should know that Howie Hawkins will be running for governor of New York. We have to build statewide as well.

**Bhaskar Sunkara, editor and publisher of Jacobin Magazine** applauded the victory of Sawant in Seattle. He said we have to look at the lessons of her campaign. A socialist campaign can win he said when it has a good organization, capacity, funding, and when it can win over key factions of the Democratic Party, such as union endorsements. It is interesting, he pointed out, that both SA candidates out-fund-raised their opponents by 3:1 and they had a deeper ground game and more media buzz.

So Seattle is a model that should be studied. That model shows that there was a base in place already from the anti-war movements and the anti-foreclosure movements that had build organization and had the power to engage in fund raising. Sawant was a known person. SA had the wisdom to adopt social democratic demands such as the $15 an hour minimum wage, said Sunkara. While they might be the same demands, when they are made by liberals they are very different than when they are made by socialists.

Sunkara said he hoped that the ISO would also make such electoral efforts. Electoral efforts, however, are not enough. We as socialists are not looking to legislate to make social change. We’re looking to build a powerful, confident movement.

With de Blasio’s election, it is our task to be in opposition to the hegemony of the liberals. We need to educate, mobilize, and build a confident minority. We want to influence the majority bloc that does legislate. We don’t want to make technical tweaks or to be involved in backroom deals, we want to build a movement. There is room on the left for independent political action.

The Democratic Party’s old system of patronage is losing its grip, as it is also losing its grip on the unions, said Sunkara. In response ot Akrivos’s remark about the “despicable” role of the Working Families Party, Sunkara said, we should not be opposed to the Working Families Party. Socialists need not butt heads with them. He said we should look at the [Tish James](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letitia_James) campaign. IN a one party city one must see the gradients. There is also room for independent political action. We want to build what will be the nucleus of a mass party.

**John Halle**, the chair, commented briefly that when leftists give critical support to Democrats, as many did to Obama, the effect is deadening. Criticism stops and people hold off on organizing to see what’s next.

**Alan Akrivos** briefly defended his argument that political action was a result of the downturn in strikes and protest. He gave the example of Boeing itself where it had been difficult to take action. We have seen a collapse in strikes levels, he said. It is a trend.

In Minneapolis SA got the endorsement of the Federation of Labor which has 30,000 members and of SEIU. We told SEIU that we oppose the Democratic Party and disagree with their support for it. But because out members had played a leading role in solidarity for SEIU the leaders and members had to support us.

In Minneapolis our candidate Ty Moore ran against a progressive Democrat, a Latina, a woman. Their identity politics leads them to build an identity bloc (of Latinos). We, however, got the endorsement of the Minneapolis Centro de Trabajadores en Lucha [Center of Workers in Struggle]. We ran not on identity politics but on class politics.

In Seattle, our role in the $15 an hour minimum wage movement was crucial. We were very involved in [Sea](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/27/us/voters-in-seatac-wash-back-15-minimum-wage.html)Pac.

Akrivos expanded on the Working Families Party. The WFP campaigned against Howie Hawkins. Leet’s remember that the Communications Workers of America (CWA) created the WPF as a kind of doppelganger of the Labor Party led by [Tony Mazzocchi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_Mazzocchi). We were then in the Labor Militant tendency and were very involved in all of that. The WFP was launched as an alternative to the Labor Party.

**John Halle** mentioned Eric Chester’s [*Socialist and the Ballot Box: An Historical Analysis*](http://www.amazon.com/Socialists-Ballot-Box-Historical-Analysis/dp/0030041422) which, he said, makes the point that Socialists opposed the organization of a labor party.

**Roesch** said that in our electoral work we want to involve more than the left. Occupy was what it was not because of the role of the left in organizing it, but because of the many people who increased its numbers and gave it significance. We need to cooperate she said, and mentioned the Dan La Botz campaign in Ohio.

She emphasized that the CWA/WFP experience was quite different than what we are seeing with the Chicago Teachers Union and its thinking about independent political action. This is a political process involving a real discussion and debate about independent political office. People are thinking about questions like: Would winning office change things? Or would we also need more working class power? SA did a spectacular job in Seattle. How do we expand that?

**Sundara –** We must engage with social democrats, with Progressives. In NYC there is room for independent political action. I think it is good that people ran for legislative posts and not for executive posts, because then there would be no alternative but to impose austerity.

**Following the panel, there was about half an hour for speakers from the floor.**

**SA Member (a woman) –** I wanted to mention that we had thought about campaigns in other places, such as New York and Boston. We considered New York and dropped the idea. We made an attempt in Boston but didn’t make it to the runoff. We have thought about Brooklyn in the area of Park Slope where there is a strong Green Party and Kensington where we were involved in Occupy Kensington. We have thought about state offices. We have debated whether to run many candidates or to focus on a few.

**League for a Revolutionary Party Member (a man) –** He is a transit workers and a TWU 100 member and talked about how bad the union officials were on the contract. He said that it was important to remember that parliamentary action was insufficient and that we would need a mass revolutionary party.

[**Frank Llewelyn**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Llewellyn) **of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA)** – He said he didn’t disagree with much that had been said, but that we should remember that in 35 states the right is winning and winning big. He said regarding de Blasio that if people want to run as independents they should remember that historically people usually first run as Democrats and then when they lose run as independents, and that is possible in New York because of public financing.

**Sundara –** The SA campaign has shown us the importance of voluntarism, of risk taking. We need to build socialist tendencies without party boundaries.He suggested that SA and the ISO should merge into one organization.

**Roesch –** We need to build the left opposition to de Blasio. We need to work with the municipal unions. We need to work with the groups fighting stop-and-frisk. We have to get ICE out of Rykers Island. We need to contribute to a renewal of a politics and culture of the left.

**End of Report**