

Response to “Worsening Situation in Seattle” Letter to IEC

Submitted by Ty Moore on 11/25/17 to the IS with a request that it be distributed via email to IEC and any other comrades who received the original letter.

It was with disappointment when I saw Kshama’s letter on the “Worsening Situation in Seattle” was circulated to the International Executive Committee (labelled “US Doc 4”). I had initially been hopeful that, rather than producing a written reply which risked escalating tensions further, that an agreed process of verbal discussions would be best to resolve things.

The initial draft of this “Worsening Situation” letter was sent to the EC less than two weeks after Kshama, Calvin and I had sat down together, for the first time since the crisis began last spring, to begin a pro-active process to rebuild relations and re-establish a collective leadership in Seattle. Our meeting on October 17th came together following discussions with Danny B from the IS, and while it was only a tentative start, it seemed everyone was committed to a serious and good-faith effort to a process of dialogue aimed at rebuilding trust and overcoming the leadership crisis.

This work is absolutely vital, in my view, especially since the challenge of re-building a strong, collective political leadership in the Seattle organization is at the heart of the wider internal crisis facing Socialist Alternative. Unfortunately, the extremely serious but unfounded accusations in this letter -- coming against the background of rejection of my previous attempts to open a process of de-escalating tensions on the EC -- raises fresh questions about what will be needed to succeed.

It is of course welcome and needed for comrades to put any concerns of this nature clearly on the table for discussion. There are ongoing and very real questions over how to overcome the breakdown in the elected leadership structures, and their lack of sufficient oversight over all aspects of the Seattle work. However, I completely reject the accusations raised in the letter that any of this constitutes “new rumors... maligning the Council Office and questioning its accountability to the democratic structures of the organization,” or that comrades were engaged in “a highly irresponsible doubling down on the earlier accusations, from this Spring, against the Council Office and me of a lack of accountability, only now no longer restricted to NC members, but being raised with a wide layer of BC members.”

Accusing comrades of an effort to malign and spread rumors about the council office is a very serious accusation and, if true, would justify disciplinary action and removing me from my current position as Seattle Organizer (responsible for coordinating the Seattle Executive Committee (SEC), the City Committee (CC), and bringing together the work of the council office and wider party organization). If the comrades are serious about pursuing the accusations then a real investigation should be organized to get to the bottom of it. What is completely unacceptable is to continue raising such accusation with a widening number of comrades while not agreeing to either a serious process of dialogue to resolve things or a real investigation. Otherwise the comrades should clearly retract the accusations. This is just one of a number of examples that, in my view, makes clear the need for the IEC to send a commission to the US, as proposed in the letter to the IEC by NC members Patrick, Kailyn, and myself, which was already circulated (see “US Doc 14”).

I completely reject that I am involved in or aware of an effort to maliciously spread rumors about Kshama or the council office. After checking with comrades, I am confident none of the EC or NC comrades accused of spreading rumors (this accusation has now gone beyond Philip and myself) have raised with CC members the more controversial points that the EC has agreed should be limited to the NC members and observers.

The only concrete evidence cited to justify the accusations was a single conversation with Colin, my Branch Organizer, which he initiated with me after reading a document from Jeremy and Tony (sent to the IEC as "US Doc 5"). In my view, this is hardly enough evidence to base such serious allegations around.

Jeremy and Tony's document further developed a widespread discussion taking place on Seattle's structures, including the challenge of integrating our city council work with the branches and party structures. In answering Colin's questions on that topic, I did make a mistake by raising with Colin - before raising with the SEC - the lack of SEC discussion before Kshama's vote a couple days earlier for a replacement city council position, which I learned about first in the media. As Kshama explains in her letter, I later found out how hastily that important decision needed to be made and given that there was no disagreement on the substance I felt it was best to drop the issue.

However, I did not raise this concern with Colin in a manner that maligned Kshama or implied any attempt by the council office to evade accountability to democratic structures. Rather I raised it as an example of how the rapid pace and huge pressures of the Seattle work creates enormous challenges for the SEC to have meaningful input and oversight over many decisions. I raised with Colin how the SEC and CC, in my view, has not been capable of adequately staying on top of the the party building work or the council work in the recent period.

I communicated all this to Danny, Calvin, and Kshama immediately after finding out it was a concern, which was less than a week after my discussion with Colin. I clearly communicated my mistake to Colin and have not raised this issue subsequently, and I don't have see any evidence that anyone else continues to raise the issue. When I discussed with Colin to register my mistake he confirmed that he in no way heard my comments as maligning the council office or trying to spread rumors.

Structures debate

This false characterization of my discussion with Colin in the letter is, unfortunately, just the most prominent example of how the letter paints a generally one-sided picture by omitting the central context for all three of the alleged rumors: the widespread discussion taking place in Seattle on our internal structures. There are many self-evident examples active comrades have raised about the challenge of ensuring our ten branches and City Committee have meaningful democratic involvement over our priorities, orientation, and key political decisions, given the fast pace of events and rapid shifts required. With most of our campaigning activity currently centered around our council office work, it is to be expected that questions about how council decisions are made are being raised. As I explain further below, this is also the source of discussion around the other two so-called rumors concerning the Peoples Budget and Affordable Housing Alliance (AHA).

To allow for a genuine and democratic discussion to take place, it is vital all comrades deal with such questions in a responsible manner, especially where there are disagreements within the leadership. This

is especially true given the extreme suspicions and tensions in the leadership. This means avoiding any personalized criticism of other comrades, or anything that comes across as maligning comrades or questioning their loyalty to the organization and its democratic structures. At the same time, it is also irresponsible to respond to comrades who raise concerns about the very real weaknesses of our leadership bodies in Seattle by questioning comrades motivations or accusing comrades of spreading malicious rumors. This practice is already having a serious chilling effect on the discussion.

Comrades from all sides of the debate will acknowledge that there have been serious challenges with integrating the council and party work, especially recently. The Seattle Executive Committee (SEC) is the main body tasked with bringing together the work of the ten branches, the work of the 4.5 Seattle FTers, and the work of the council office FTers (3 FTers plus 2 half-timers), as well as City Committee (a body of 27 members and 11 regular observers which normally meets monthly). Even before the outbreak of the present internal crisis, the SEC faced serious challenges keeping on top of the pace of work and huge pressures on the Seattle organization. But since the crisis broke out in April, the SEC has met very irregularly, suffered under broken lines of communication, and has not been capable of keeping on top of many areas of work in a meaningful way, whether that be mobilizations to city hall, shifting roles on the branch committees, or key tactical decisions in our coalition work.

The present discussion was initially brought verbally into the Seattle City Committee by Jeremy, Tony, and others in August. This was done in the context of sharp criticisms of Stephan, Philip, and Seattle party-building work being introduced to Seattle NC members/observers by EC Majority comrades in the aftermath of the July NC, as well as sharp criticism of Kshama and the EC majority for the way in which Stephan was removed from Seattle work. In my view, both sides made mistakes contributing to an unhealthy escalation of tensions, making genuine democratic debate over the problems more difficult.

The document from Tony and Jeremy circulated to the City Committee on October 5th argues that the current structures “seriously weaken the important connection between the Council Office and branches,” and points along these lines have been firmly raised at City Committee meetings and more widely in informal discussions with CC and BC members. Other criticisms were also raised, including concern about an overly top-down approach to party building, disagreement over the role of the FTers, and lack of meaningful democratic control by the City Committee.

Any path toward overcoming the tensions Seattle must include a sober assessment of the SEC and City Committee’s current inability to exercise adequate democratic oversight over all aspects of our work, and to map out concrete steps to overcome that. For example, all SEC comrades recognize the need to re-establish Council Strategy Team meetings (an SEC sub-committee that fell apart amid the tensions) for this exact reason. Flowing from this point, to overcome tensions all comrades will need to agree that discussion on the City Committee about the weakening of Seattle’s leadership structures and linked problem of coordination -- if raised responsibly in a way that avoids personalization or one-sided blame -- *has absolutely nothing in common* with the repeated accusations in the letter about spreading rumors or maligning the council office.

At the same time, given the tensions it is very damaging to use loaded language about “lack of accountability” as some comrades have in relation to the council office, or to make overly personalized suggestions that any comrades are attempting to act independently our elected structures. This applies equally to the work of myself and the party building team, which have been repeatedly accused of

intentionally evading democratic oversight by the SEC. At EC and SEC meetings, comrades on all sides of this debate have repeatedly engaged in exaggerated or outright false accusations of one another, as well as overly barbed and personalized comments. This approach cannot continue.

Danger of escalating tensions

With a serious and determined attitude toward building a collective leadership, I have no doubt that a calm set of discussions could, even now, allow us to work out a resolution. And I was hopeful this would be the comrades approach when a couple of the specific issues raised in Kshama's letter (though by no means all of them) were first flagged for me in a meeting with Danny B, and then a few days later at the October 17th discussion with Kshama and Calvin (though only briefly, at the end of our discussion). But at that meeting, designed to open a process of renewed collaboration, Kshama already made clear her intention to send this letter.

I appealed to the comrades to first engage in a process of discussion to see if there were misunderstandings that could be cleared up and if there were steps that could be agreed to address the concerns in a mutually agreeable way. I urged the comrades to consider how sending a formal complaint to the EC, based on accusations of malicious intent - before even attempting a meaningful discussion to check if what they had heard second hand was in fact accurate - would sharpen tensions at exactly a moment we have a chance to de-escalate.

That invitation was not taken up. And the impact of accusing myself and others of malicious intent and dishonesty when disagreements come up or mistakes are made is to create serious barriers to even properly discuss out the issues, much less resolve them. I have repeatedly emphasized with all EC and NC comrades, especially since the July NC, that I do not think it is politically justified or responsible for the EC to continue operating as two intransigent blocks.

Up until Kshama's letter was sent to the IEC, I was still hopeful that a serious mutual attempt at a verbal dialogue would be a better method resolve things than producing this written reply. But clearly one purpose of the letter is to add to the formal record of escalating accusations in the run-up to the IEC and NC meetings. This approach lends itself to doubling down on exaggerated suspicions and points away from the potential to rebuild a collective leadership in Seattle. I am concerned that this letter is part of a more generalized escalation on the part of the EC majority, as raised in the letter I wrote the IEC with Patrick and Kailyn (see "US Doc 14" circulated to IEC members). This threatens to deepen the factionalized atmosphere in Seattle and nationally around mainly organizational questions, without any principled political differences justifying the polarization. This again points to the need for the IEC to intervene with a commission to help chart a different way forward.

Answering the specific allegations

Affordable Housing Alliance

The other two allegations raised in the letter should be seen in this context, and again the issue appears to be mainly a tendency to conflate malicious rumors with necessary democratic discussion over the challenges we face emerging organically from comrades experience.

To take the first example, it is an exaggeration to say myself or others have said that “the Affordable Housing Alliance (AHA) coalition, and its inaugural meeting, were undemocratically created by the Council Office without oversight of the SEC.” What I have raised, first of all with EC comrades, is frustration that the inaugural public meeting of AHA was planned for just two days before our Affordable Seattle launch meeting on July 29th. Affordable Seattle was the banner we used for a six-week mass door-knocking campaign linked to our electoral support for Jon Grant and Nikkita Oliver in the August 1st Seattle primary. Seattle comrades carried out nearly 600 door-knocking shifts leafleting for, among other things, our public Affordable Seattle launch event on July 29th.

This plan had been agreed by the City Committee in early June to be the central focus of branch activity. The SEC had also agreed, in a meeting later in June, that the council office (which was legally barred from involvement in electoral work) would launch the Affordable Housing Alliance as a complementary effort, bringing together a wider coalition organizations focussed on the fight for an Economic Eviction Assistance ordinance. However, no launch date was set and some secondary disagreements over the character of AHA were not resolved because the SEC was not able to meet in July (or August) due to schedule conflicts as well as rising tensions around the July NC.

This explains the confusion and frustration felt by myself and many comrades when, without prior notice or discussion, we saw a public email and social media announcements for the big launch of AHA just two days before the big public launch of Affordable Seattle. That frustration was added to when I later learned that subsequent AHA coalition meetings in early August had already discussed draft legislation for the Economic Eviction Assistance - which was to be the central campaign of the branches into the fall - without that having been circulated to the SEC, City Committee, or brought into the branches for discussion.

I attempted to set up discussions with Calvin and Kshama in early August to discuss this (and the tensions in general), but they were not able to, though I did discuss it with other EC members. Philip later raised the issue at an SEC meeting in September when we begin regularly meeting again.

In an early August discussion with Adam, who was leading up the AHA work, he fully agreed to a process of bringing the discussion into the branches, even if belatedly. At that stage, my over-riding concern was attempting to rebuild a functioning Seattle leadership so, having worked out a process to go forward with Adam I felt it was best to put the issue to rest and that is what happened. However, since the clear lack of coordination was an experience a whole layer of active comrades went through, it has continued to be a point of reference in discussion about the challenges we face. I do not raise this as an example of lack of accountability but rather as an example of the challenges that must be overcome by the Seattle leadership as a whole.

Peoples' Budget Discussion

The letter asserts that “Seattle members have been told that the Council Office did not have proper discussions within the SEC about whether the branches should orient towards the People’s Budget, and that the Council Office essentially steamrolled its way on this issue, and did not give branches the opportunity to participate in the decisions.” No specific source or evidence is provided for this accusation, and I believe it is baseless. What is very real, and I suspect is the basis of this accusation, is that the rapidness of the tactical shift toward the People’s Budget struggle - which was proposed by the

whole SEC and passed unanimously by the City Committee - produced some initial frustrations that needed to be discussed out.

It came against the background of a lengthy process of discussion, initiated in mid-August and discussed out over the course of two City Committee meetings. The fall plans and priorities resolution proposed by the SEC and City Committee to the Sept 9th Citywide Membership meeting which, after discussion, did not include the Peoples Budget among the fall priorities. This resolution was then brought into the branches and active plans and targets were prepared for the agreed priorities (Minneapolis campaign work alongside energetic tabling around "Stop the Sweeps" and related housing slogans, and the Jon Grant election). Then in the run-up to the September 28th City Committee, the idea of using the Peoples Budget to rally the wider Housing for All coalition behind a budget proviso to Stop the Sweeps was raised, debated, and unanimously proposed by the SEC to the Sept. 28th City Committee.

This was a completely correct tactic, and after the case was made to comrades a whole layer of active members threw themselves into the fight. However, the rapid shift in orientation coming after a lengthy process of discussion sparked discussion among some comrades about how the opportunities opened by our council position frequently compel us to rapidly shift focus. In this process, some minor frustrations flowing from communication mistakes came up, but I did not hear any comrades raise concerns about "steamrolling" by the council office or SEC.

While there were important tactical debates, which the wider tensions and suspicions made more difficult to navigate, it is not true that Philip or I opposed the tactic, as evidenced by the unanimous votes in favor of it. The discussion also brought out differences over how to integrate branches into council centered initiatives in a way that didn't bypass existing lines of communication, but this was never a question of an "attempt to oppose broader branch involvement in the Council Office work." These debates are reflected in the documents from Tony, Jeremy, Sarah and Ramy that IEC members had circulated to them.

Staff Study Group

The letter also raises that "SEC members who are not on the PBT were not made aware of a fulltimer study group." At an early September SEC meeting it was verbally reported that, with most party building FTers in Minneapolis for long periods, we planned to fill out the long established Friday morning PBT study groups with a study group open to all SA FTers (i.e. SA national FTers and two temporary campaign FTers) on "Lessons of October." This was also discussed at our weekly SA staff meetings, announced over our SA staff list on September 17th, and referenced in a proposal sent to SEC on Oct. 3rd on our overall fall political education plans. When Danny from the IS was in town he participated in the study group. It is unfortunate that, having possibly missed these communications, instead of simply approaching me or other PBT comrades for discussion, the issue is now raised as a formal complaint.

I understand Stephan will be sending a short note regarding the accusations of his conversation with Kailyn so I won't deal with that here.