Understanding Our Vote on Carmen Best

Letter to the National Committee and BC members from the Executive Committee 8/13/18

This is an internal document that could complicate our work in Seattle if it was made public. Please distribute this to active SA members as needed while keeping in mind these security considerations.

Following a series of discussions, the EC met Saturday to resolve a complicated tactical decision over how to vote in Monday's Seattle City Council nomination of Carmen Best for police chief. Best is a black woman, a 26-year veteran of the SPD, viewed as a reformer with long connections in the black community. She emerged as the nominee as a result of uproar from black community leaders and anti-police brutality activists against a racist attempt by the Mayor and establishment to push her aside.

After careful consideration of all sides of this issues, considering all options and through collective discussion with the Executive Committee, the International Secretariat (the IS is elected leadership of the CWI), many National Committee and Seattle CC members – and crucially a number of left allies and black leaders in Seattle – we feel confident that the best tactic is to vote "yes." This must be combined with a speech by Kshama before she votes warning about Best's limitations, appealing to step up the fightback against racist policing, and pointing towards to need for an alternative to the capitalist system.

How to vote on this is a tactical question, not a question of principle. It is a question of how we can most effectively win broader support for our program on the police, and how a "no" or "yes" vote will actually be understood – not simply how we intend it to be understood. While a "no" vote on a police chief would be our strongly preferred and default position, it is clear that in the context of either silence or a near unanimous support for Best in the African American community – including among activists fighting police brutality – a "no" vote would not be seen, in the first place, as a clear stand against police racism and repression. For much of the black working class – and a large section of activists fighting police racism – a "no" vote would be seen as dogmatically refusing to stand with black and brown communities in their attempt to push back against racism in the establishment and police.

We should not be afraid to stand against the tide when this helps us win over a more conscious minority. But Marxists should also not be afraid to make tactical concessions to working class consciousness when this helps us maintain the cohesion of the movement around wider goals and to win the ear of the working class to communicate our wider program. In our fight for $15 in Seattle, for example, we decided a concession to small business (a phase-in) was needed, given the confusion and positive illusions in small business held by most working class people. This concession was not designed to win over small business. It was to deny our enemies the ability to use workers' confused consciousness to drive a wedge between ourselves and sections of the class, and to maintain the cohesion of the movement to win $15 and build support for our wider program. There are of course limits in any comparison, but this example helps illustrate the Marxist method we feel needs to be applied to the Best vote.

Background on Best's Appointment

In May, the process to select Seattle's new chief of police blew up into a very public controversy. In a process driven by Mayor Durken, councilmember Lorena Gonzalez, and former council president Tim Burgess, the three finalists announced for the new chief of police didn't include Best. Black community leaders, including the key local figures of the fight against police racism and violence, organized a public outcry against the exclusion of Carmen Best. Referring to the exclusion of Carmen Best, Nikkita Oliver said "this racist mess will not stand."

Facing huge pressure and scandalized by a discriminatory process with a total lack of transparency, Mayor Durken did an abrupt about-face and announced that she was nominating Best as the new chief, pending

confirmation from City Council. What is clear is that, out of this process, the overwhelming feeling among politically conscious sections of the black community and beyond is that Best's nomination is the product of their fight against racism in the SPD and the political establishment. This is a significant difference with the way the process unfolded with the previous police chief Kathleen O'Toole, who was also was celebrated as a reformer, and whom we voted against.

Black clergy, community leaders, and even many leading voices against police violence and racism like Andre Taylor (brother of Che Taylor whose racist killing by the SPD sparked protests) are enthusiastic backers of Best. Even those who share our analysis of the police and skepticism toward Best have decided not to make any public criticisms of Best because of the consciousness of black workers around this issue.

Voting yes does not mean we will join in the celebrations of the establishment. Her appointment will not solve anything for black workers and youth and we will make our warnings known. At the same time, we are prepared to make a concession to support the aspirations of an oppressed section of Seattle in order to fight shoulder to shoulder with them through all the experiences that will be needed to help clarify the need for socialist policies. While Best has attempted to claim the mantle of a reformer, saying her number one priority is rebuilding trust and relations with the community, we should have no illusions that she represents a serious break from the status quo of institutional racism or the repressive role of the police in capitalist society. The police union (SPOG) also weighed into the public debate, backing Best as a 26-year veteran of the SPD who had risen through the ranks, underscoring our perspective that Best is not at this stage prepared to go beyond largely symbolic reform measures.

However, in a display of independence from SPOG, in July Best fired two police officers for using deadly force in a simple car theft incident. After the prosecutors refused to press charges on the officers, SPOG is now demanding Best reinstate the officers. Best also has instituted an anti-racist training program for police, bringing in the group Youth Undoing Institutional Racism, which emerged out of the wider BLM movement, helped initiate the No New Youth Jail struggle, and is seen as a fighting, movement-based group. We should have no illusions that these gestures represent a meaningful break with the status quo, but it helps to understand the support behind Best.

How Our Vote Will be Understood

Our preferred position would of course be to vote "no," as we correctly did against the previous chief O'Toole in 2014 despite significant illusions in her promises for reform. But even with the O'Toole appointment, the EC and SEC then did not treat the question of voting "no" as an automatic thing or a question of principle. We took a meticulous approach to considering how our vote and speech would be understood. This situation has been more complicated and required quite a serious consideration.

In the last couple weeks, we went through a systematic process of discussion with our allies on the left and in the black community, from faith and civil rights organizations to former Black Panthers. Even with the warnings from leaders in the black community about how this would be received, we attempted to build the political basis for a "no" vote. We asked those leaders that shared our criticisms of Best to publically back us if Kshama voted "no," which would have been vital to ensure our reasons for voting "no" would be understood by at least a significant radical minority. However, given the confusion and strength of the mood for Best, no one committed to defend a "no" vote or even to raise concerns publicly about Best.

Through this process it became clear that a "no" vote would be interpreted by key sections of the black working class and activist layers as a dogmatic refusal to stand in solidarity the democratic demands of the community, with our attempt to communicate a principled opposition against police racism and repression deeply obscured.

Nikkita Oliver and those around her have also been largely silent. After loudly organizing to fight Best's exclusion from the nomination process, since the Mayor's reversal Nikkita put out one tweet saying that, "as an abolitionist" she supports none of the options for chief, but included no specific criticism of Best and she has been silent since. Unlike with Kathleen O'Toole, there has been virtually no public criticism of Best from

movement activists, while many black leaders have painted her nomination as a victory of the movement. Importantly, in this concrete situation, support for Best in the black community reflects a wider mood to fight against the whole legacy of qualified black and brown people – and women of color especially - being discriminated against and passed over. But as always working class consciousness is contradictory and we act in a way that doesn't cut us off but pushes forward the most progressive, fighting instincts.

For of those who back Best's nomination, however, it doesn't automatically follow that there are real hopes she can really change things, that the structural racism embedded in the criminal justice system will be curbed on her watch, or that we shouldn't tomorrow begin to fight Best when the SPD acts against working class and oppressed communities. Our position is to side with the black and brown community both in their anger at the establishment's handling of this process and against police racism, and to link our vote to a call to action to continue the fight. The best way to do that is to vote "yes" combined with clear warnings in a sharp statement.

Perspectives and Consciousness

While Best may enjoy a more sustained honeymoon than O'Toole did, we should fully expect that new outrages by the SPD will expose Best's limitations and her support in the black community and more widely will wane. For our ultra-left critics, this will be seen as confirmation that a "yes" vote was a "betrayal." However, the rigid thinking of many on the left is not mirrored in the consciousness of most working people, including most of the black working class. For wider layers, there is no contradiction in Kshama siding with the democratic demands of the black community in her vote while clearly warning of Best's limitations and the need to step up the struggle. And unlike the out-of-touch formal logic of the ultra-lefts, most working people will not see a contradiction when, the next time SPD engages in racist violence or political repression, SA and Kshama sharply criticise and protest Chief Best.

On the other hand, voting "no" on Best risks undermining our authority and legitimacy among black workers -- even many who may generally agree that the capitalist state is built upon racism and can't be reformed. A backlash from the black community today would undermine our ability in the future to get an ear for our program or action proposals. Even when events would appear to many on the far left to "vindicate" our "no" vote, it is far from automatic that wider layers would see it this way, especially among black and brown workers and activists who felt we'd dogmatically snubbed them previously.

Given that we are not in a position to effect the outcome (all other eight council members will be voting "yes"), then the central question is how Kshama's vote and speech will be interpreted, and how it will prepare the ground for winning over wider layers to our program in the future. With no visible points of support for a "no" vote, this course would be exploited by our enemies in the establishment and could even be cast by many of our allies (Andre Taylor, etc) as snubbing the movement to fight racism in the police and establishment. In this context, a "yes" vote combined with a sharp statement against racist policing and for our socialist ideas is the best way to position ourselves for building future struggles against the SPD and winning wider layers to our program.

As it became clear in the last week that no public support existed for a "no" vote, on Saturday the EC met to take a final decision. We agreed that however Kshama voted on Monday there would be widespread confusion over what it represented, but that a "yes" vote will likely do less damage to our longer-term ability to win over the black working class (and beyond) to our ideas than a "no" vote would. Given that we are not in a position to effect the outcome (all other eight council members will be voting "yes"yes), then the central question is how Kshama's vote and speech will be interpreted, and how it will prepare the ground for winning over wider layers to our program in the future.

The vote would be combined with a clear speech from Kshama skillfully outlining our disagreements with Best, warning that her lack of commitment to serious reforms (much less a socialist program) means that new racist police killings are inevitable, and that only a movement from below will achieve the changes demanded by the community. We will explain our "yes" vote by referencing the racist process led by the Mayor behind closed doors that initially passed over Best,

and the broad community outcry against it, and that despite our warnings we will not stand in the way of the democratic will of the wider movement including important sections of the more conscious black working class. We will point toward the need for a unified movement demanding accountability and fundamental changes in police policy.