

# No New Youth Jail!

*Kshama Sawant's Speech Outside the Youth Detention Center at the Seattle MLK Rally, January 19, 2015*



**Councilmember Kshama Sawant, along with a broad coalition of community organizations, opposed the new youth jail on the Seattle City Council, where she cast the sole vote against it. At this year's MLK rally, she spoke about her opposition to the new detention center, about the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement, and about the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

My Sisters and Brothers,

Greetings on this day of remembrance for the great fighter and radical, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Many thanks to the MLK Celebration Committee, and all who, through their dedication, ensured that we could come together today.

As we stand here, more than four decades after the assassination of Dr. King, we see racial injustice persisting as a defining characteristic of American society.

In our city, 54 percent of black children live in poor households, compared to 6 percent of white children. Black people in Seattle face higher unemployment, worse schools, fewer good jobs and decreased services compared to white counterparts.

Across the US, we bear witness as the brutality of an increasingly militarized police takes young black life after young black life. African Americans now constitute nearly one

million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population.

We stand here today at the site of the current youth detention center. We are told that the solution to the inhumane conditions here is to build a new and larger, \$200 million detention center.

Obviously, we do not want anyone to be in inhumane conditions. But if inhumane conditions were the real issue, let's be clear: incarcerating children is inhumane. If King County was proposing renovations to improve conditions, while mainly investing dollars in expanding youth programs, it would be far less concerning.

Seattle spends a total of less than \$5 million a year on all the jobs programs for all young people combined. Imagine the impact on crime if the city and county invested these \$200 million not in jail cells, but in youth jobs. In programs like the highly successful CareerBridge that has been spearheaded by organizations such as Black Prisoners Caucus, Village of Hope, and Africa Town.

A strong and all-encompassing coalition of community and political organizations rallied against the youth jail vote on the County Council and the City Council. The NAACP; Ending the Prison Industrial Complex (EPIC); Washington Incarceration Stops Here (WISH); the Faith Action Network; Youth Undoing Institutional Racism (YUIR); No New Jim Crow Seattle; the Black Prisoners' Caucus; the Gender Justice League; the Not One More Deportation Campaign; Colectivo de Detenido Northwest Detention Center; Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites; and Families FIRST (Friends Involved in Resistance to State Torture); faith leaders; academics; and health care professionals. The broad community spoke decisively against the new youth jail.

And yet, mine was the sole No vote on the youth jail - one No vote on both the City Council and the County Council put together.

Why did no other elected official stand with this broad coalition of our community, and vote against business as usual - against the business of incarceration?

When I asked my fellow City Councilmembers - they said a No vote will not stop what is going on - yes, they said, there is racial

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injustice, yes, they said, we need to fight for fundamental solutions, but, they said, this is not a good time to vote No.

I hear this refrain over and over again: "This is not a good time, not the right time, this is not well-timed".

Dr. King said, "we know from painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation." Dr. King also said, "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

Racial division has throughout the history of this country been the key tool used by the elite to perpetuate class oppression, and to prevent a challenge to this exploitative system of capitalism. Such a challenge will require a mass struggle against racism AND capitalism. At the end of his life, Dr. King was grappling with this very question.

The movement against the youth jail

coincides with the movement that began on the streets of Ferguson last August. This nationwide movement has become the most significant challenge so far to institutional racism in the US since the 1970s. Join this new movement.

Join the struggle to win radical political demands against racially biased policing, the struggle against the wider racial injustice, the struggle against the crushing economic inequality.

Join the struggle for a political alternative that will fight against the two big business parties that preside over this brutal system of capitalism, and to build a society that can finally be free of oppression.

***Kshama Sawant is a Seattle City Councilmember  
and member of Socialist Alternative***

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