

Seattle's Ordinance Banning Caste Discrimination

Frequently Asked Questions

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When it goes into effect later this month, what would the [ordinance](#) achieve?

Our socialist City Council office's legislation outlaws discrimination based on caste in the city of Seattle, including in public and private sectors. In other words, the law bans caste-based discrimination in employment, housing, and use of public places. It does this by adding caste as a category protected against discrimination into Seattle's existing anti-discrimination law. The city's law already bans discrimination based on numerous factors such as gender identification, disability, national origin, religion, and sexual orientation.

How will the Office of Civil Rights investigate caste-based discrimination if this ordinance passes?

The principal mechanism by which this law will be enforced is for our movement to fight to hold corporations accountable in the courts.

What is caste?

Caste is a system of oppression that divides people into a rigid hierarchy of groups based on birth, with the lower groups facing serious discrimination, oppression, and even violence. It originates from about two thousand years ago in South Asia, but remains pervasive today under capitalism. In addition to South Asia, similarly affected groups are also found in or originate from elsewhere in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific region, and various diaspora communities. Like other forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism, caste oppression is an outgrowth of class-based societies that enshrine the exploitation of the majority for the benefit of the few at the top.

What does "Dalit" mean?

Many oppressed-caste people prefer to be referred to by the self-chosen identity of "Dalits," which means "those who have been broken but are resilient."

If the caste system originated in South Asia, why are we talking about it in the United States? Is caste discrimination happening in the United States?

Yes, caste discrimination is a very serious issue in the United States. Dalit community members from South Asia and other oppressed-caste immigrant community members often face discrimination, especially in the workplace, including in the tech sector. Data from [Equality Labs](#) show that one in four caste-oppressed people faced physical and verbal assault, one in three faced education discrimination, and two in three (sixty seven percent) faced workplace discrimination. A separate study conducted on wider issues related to the South Asian American community, conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, also found significant evidence of caste based discrimination in the United States, finding that “5 percent of all respondents report having encountered discrimination due to their caste identity.” The Carnegie study also stated that “given the sensitive nature of caste identity, nonresponses in the survey could mask those who do not wish to disclose their caste affiliation even if they are aware of their family’s caste identity.” In other words, if anything, the statistics may reflect under-reporting of the occurrence of caste-based discrimination.

In a [public letter](#) published anonymously, thirty Dalit women software engineers documented the systematic caste bias they had experienced in hiring, referrals, and peer review, and the insults and demeaning comments they had endured. The workers described the caste discrimination and sexism they faced as “dominant caste locker room culture at its worst.”

The California Department of Fair Employment and Housing won an appeals court ruling in August, 2022, to proceed with a lawsuit alleging that a Dalit engineer at Cisco Systems—a multibillion-dollar tech conglomerate—was actively targeted by his dominant-caste managers, and denied professional opportunities, such as a raise and promotions, because of his caste background. As a columnist in [The New York Times](#) wrote, the “technology giant got away with ignoring the persistent caste discrimination because American laws don’t yet recognize caste discrimination as a valid form of exclusion,” allowing companies to operate “in willful ignorance of the terrifying realities of caste.”

After that lawsuit was initially announced, [nearly 260 tech workers](#) talked about the caste discrimination they had faced in the workplace, including in the Pacific Northwest, in companies like Facebook, Cisco, Google, Microsoft, IBM, and Amazon.

Is caste discrimination (and caste oppression) related to other forms of oppression like racism and sexism?

The history of American capitalism reveals how racism against Black people was systematically developed by the elite to justify the institution of slavery, which was an eye-popping source of profits for the wealthy plantation owners. The elite needed to

manufacture bigotry and utterly false ideas about the inferiority of Black people in order to force society to stomach the unspeakable horrors of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. This also helped the bosses keep white workers and indentured servants in poverty and indebtedness by starkly dividing up sections of the working class and the exploited, while they (the bosses) made off with most of the wealth that workers' labor produced.

Similarly, the caste system was consciously and systematically developed by the ruling classes in South Asia and other parts of the world for thousands of years, in order to exploit the mass of ordinary people by using divide-and-conquer strategy. This meant that those who were forced into the lowest castes were the most cruelly exploited and subjected to untold violence. The caste system has been used in a similar manner by the present-day ruling classes in the respective colonial nations.

Just as racism is not the result of an “inevitable” racial friction between white and Black people, caste discrimination oppression continues to be perpetuated under the class structure of capitalist society in South Asia and now in the United States.

Some say we needed local data before the City Council passed this ordinance.

Many oppressed-caste workers have spoken up publicly in Seattle City Hall. There is no shortage of data—studies have shown caste discrimination to be a very serious issue in the US. Those studies have been heavily oriented toward the tech sector where South Asians are employed in large numbers, and Seattle is one of the biggest tech hubs in the country. In what universe would anyone imagine caste oppression not happening here? It's a little like saying there's no racism in my neighborhood. Dalits are among the most oppressed in the world, and passing this legislation would offer them basic protections. It would have been shameful if politicians had stood aside on the basis that we need a local committee to study the issue first.

Who supported this ordinance to ban caste-based discrimination in Seattle?

The ordinance has had the support of an overwhelming coalition of over 150 organizations constituting many thousands of community members. The coalition included human rights and non-profit organizations such as Amnesty International, Dalit-led organizations, tech workers, oppressed-caste communities, thousands of members from the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities, union members, socialists, and local service providers like API Chaya. The ordinance was sponsored by Seattle City Councilmember and Socialist Alternative member, Kshama Sawant. Socialist Alternative has previously helped win landmark victories such as increasing the minimum wage in Seattle, winning a tax on Amazon and other big businesses, and a series of landmark laws for renters' rights.

The nature of the coalition, which continues to grow, is perhaps the best indicator that the fight against caste discrimination is deeply connected with the fight against other forms of oppression, and against the exploitation of working people under capitalism. As the Alphabet Workers' Union—the union of Google workers—said in a statement, the “fight for the civil rights of caste-oppressed people is a workers' fight.”

Who is opposing the ordinance?

The main opposition to the banning of caste-based discrimination is from right-wing organizations, namely, the Hindu American Foundation and the Coalition of Hindus of North America. The agenda of both these extremely right-wing organizations is aligned with the reactionary regime currently in power in India, of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Modi regime has found a lot of common ground with the Trump agenda and the American right wing. Both the Hindu American Foundation and the Coalition of Hindus of North America have strongly supported the horrific anti-Muslim, anti-oppressed-caste, anti-poor citizenship laws that were attempted by the Modi regime. Almost exactly three years ago, the then Seattle City Council [voted unanimously](#) in favor of a resolution from our socialist council office condemning these unjust citizenship laws, and urging the U.S. Congress to similarly take a position condemning them.

The most prominent organization opposing our ordinance was the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which is one of the most dangerous far right organizations in India linked with the Modi regime, and which according to the [Human Rights Watch](#) was one of the three organizations most responsible for a 2002 killing of Muslims in the Western Indian state of Gujarat.

But there are individuals who identify as Dalit or oppressed-caste who oppose this ordinance. Shouldn't we listen to them?

This is far from the majority. While deeply unfortunate, this is also nothing new, and it should not confuse anyone who supports addressing oppression in society. Systems like capitalism, which are deeply oppressive and exploitative towards the majority of human beings, ensure a few spokespeople from among the oppressed and exploited themselves will assist in justifying that oppression. So we see Black public figures like Candace Owens, for example, who have reactionary, right-wing views, and who publicly opposed the Black Lives Matter movement. No politician claiming to be progressive stopped saying they supported the Black Lives Matter movement because a few right-wing Black people opposed the movement. Similarly, it was crucial that our movement demanded that City Councilmembers focus not on the minority with conservative views, but on the overwhelming majority of Dalits who want to fight to end caste oppression and who support this ordinance.

Does caste have any visible markers? If not, then how will the ordinance work in practice?

Just like characteristics such as sexual orientation and religion, caste is not visible. In fact, one of the forms of discrimination that is common is to try in different ways to “out” the caste of someone by asking questions that might confirm their caste. Those facing caste discrimination will need to rely on self-identification to expose what is taking place, as with many other forms of discrimination, including sexual orientation.

Are there any precedents to such a law?

Brandeis University, Brown University, and Colby College have recently adopted the policy of banning caste discrimination on their campuses. A similar policy was adopted last year by the California State University system for all its 23 campuses. This is particularly significant, because Cal State is the nation’s largest four-year public university system.

However, this ordinance is historic because it makes Seattle the first jurisdiction of any level in the world outside South Asia to ban caste-based discrimination. This is much like Seattle’s \$15 minimum wage law was the first such legislation in any major U.S. city.

Rebutting Right-Wing Talking Points

The right wing says this legislation could cause lawsuits.

Big business and the right wing have filed lawsuit after lawsuit against the many working-class victories we have won over the last decade, and they haven’t succeeded. We must not be intimidated or bullied, particularly when standing up for those who suffer discrimination, and we should demand all Councilmembers support this groundbreaking legislation.

Some people who engage in fear-mongering by saying “there could be lawsuits,” fail to tell you that they are from organizations who plan to be the source of those lawsuits.

The right wing says that extending protections on the basis of caste is unnecessary because such protections are already covered by existing anti-discrimination policy.

This is false. In reality, oppressed castes are a minority within a minority. They are doubly disadvantaged by virtue of being both racially-marked and caste-marked. Recognizing caste as a source of discrimination is an important step in protecting against this double disadvantage. Protections specifically against caste-based discrimination are necessary because most often those who face it and those who perpetuate it are both likely to be South Asians (of a common racial background), but of oppressed caste on the one hand and of

dominant caste on the other. Winning the ordinance has forced the city's law to acknowledge that there are stark differences of caste power and status within the South Asian American community that carry over from a long history and a continuing situation of inequality in South Asia.

The right wing says such protections are anti-Hindu.

This argument is nothing new. Remember the lawsuits against LGBTQ rights from business owners claiming that they must be allowed to discriminate because they are Christian? Everybody understands this is a right-wing argument. Genuine progressives support freedom of religion, but also understand that that cannot be an excuse to abuse LGBTQ people or discriminate against them.

The right wing says that it would disproportionately target Indian Americans.

This is totally false. Discrimination on the basis of religion and national origin is already protected by Seattle's anti-discrimination law. To say that protecting Dalit Indian Americans against discrimination would target Indian Americans from other castes is like saying addressing racism against Black and Brown people would negatively affect white people. It is a version of "White Lives Matter," which was a right-wing attempt to deny the existence of racism, with the claim that saying "Black Lives Matter" would mean discrimination against white people. The Black Lives Matter movement—and enormous amounts of statistical evidence—have exposed that racism is unfortunately alive and well in society under capitalism. The same is true of caste discrimination.

The right wing says that such protections are going to create divisions where they simply do not exist.

The argument that caste discrimination doesn't exist in the U.S. simply does not hold water, given the statistical evidence from [Equality Labs](#) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, along with the hundreds of oppressed-caste workers who have spoken out publicly.

In an attempt to assert that caste-based discrimination does not exist in the United States, the right wing often claims that the Carnegie study invalidates the methodology of the Equality Labs survey. In reality, as mentioned earlier in this FAQ, that same Carnegie study also found significant evidence of caste based discrimination in the United States. The Carnegie study also acknowledged that the date may be under-reported. The fact that both of these studies, using different methodologies, find significant caste-based discrimination, demonstrates the reality and pervasiveness of caste oppression in the United States.

The case brought against Cisco Systems by California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing, and the numerous testimonies from oppressed caste individuals that followed its filing, also show that these forms of discrimination are a serious issue in the U.S. Some people from upper castes may well insist that caste is non-existent, but just as claims of race-blindness do not erase racism, claims of caste-blindness do not erase caste oppression. In reality, such arguments are themselves an expression of the widespread discrimination facing people from oppressed castes.
