

New York City EMS worker receives massive support against right-wing smear by New York Post

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17 December 2020

A vicious smear piece by the right-wing *New York Post* on Lauren Kwei, a 23-year old paramedic in New York City, has prompted an outpouring of mass social anger over the treatment and poor pay of health care workers amidst the pandemic.

On Saturday, the *Post*, which is owned by Rupert Murdoch, ran a piece on Lauren Kwei, outing her for having an account on OnlyFans, a content subscription service where users can sell and buy original content, because she cannot survive on her pay of \$25 an hour. The platform, which is mostly used for adult content, experienced a 75 percent increase in subscribers in the spring, when tens of millions lost their jobs overnight, with 170,000 people joining each day, according to the *Huffington Post*. The *New York Post* published not only Kwei's full name and her social media account details but also the name of her employer, SeniorCareEMS, as well as her height and weight. In preparing their smear, the reporters also called her employer, as well as her mother.

Lauren Kwei has stated that she "begged" the reporters not to publish her name, since she could lose her job. In a public response to the *New York Post* piece, she explained, "Let me be very clear: I did not want the *NY Post* to run this article, much less use my name. When Dean Balsamini first 'interviewed' me, he did not tell me what this was about until after I disclosed most of my background. He did not include in his article that I started crying on the phone when he finally did tell me what he was inquiring about. He did not include that he played this 'friendly guy' reporter who just wanted to get MY side of the story, since ya know, they were gonna run it anyway, with or without my input."

When the story was published, Kwei was in West Virginia, where she is taking care of her father, who had just suffered a cardiac arrest after contracting COVID-19.

She has stated on her Twitter profile that she feared returning to the city after all her personal details had been published by the *Post*.

The *Post* piece provoked a massive backlash on social media, and a remarkable rebuttal by Kwei quickly went viral. In it, she stressed that the real story was the absolutely abysmal pay that EMS workers receive in New York City. She wrote, "I graduated paramedic school in February of 2020 and have been working ever since. I struggled a lot during the height of the pandemic. I was suicidal a lot of this year. I had panic attacks at work and even had a supervisor tell me I should consider another profession if I didn't grow a thicker skin. I am a damn good paramedic. I LOVE my job and I love taking care of people. I don't want to quit my day job and get my bag on OnlyFans—I want to serve the city of New York. That's all I have ever wanted to do. I have always believed in using my voice to speak for those who may not be heard, I was raised to ALWAYS show kindness and compassion. The *NY Post* gave me a voice. So here I am, showing myself to the world."

"I'm here to tell you all that my First Responder brothers and sisters are suffering. We need your help. We have been exhausted for months, reusing months-old PPE, being refused hazard pay, and watching our fellow healthcare workers die in front of our eyes, in our ambulances. At least three NYC EMS workers died by suicide this year and there has been very little action about the lack of mental health care accessibility for first responders. EMS are the lowest paid first responders in NYC, which leads to 50+ hour weeks and sometimes three jobs. My brothers and sisters DESERVE CHANGE!"

In another moving interview that was published by the British *Independent*, Kwei recounted her traumatic

experiences during the height of the pandemic in New York City in the spring, when at least 22,000 people died and EMS experienced a daily call volume of up to 7,000. “I work as a transport paramedic where my typical calls are to take patients from nursing homes to their various doctors’ appointments. With Covid, my transports were more often taking extremely sick patients from one hospital to another.

“I transported a 40-year-old physician’s assistant who was intubated, on a ventilator, with three IV drips running, and still trying to rip his own tube out. The nurses on the floor said to me, ‘This is one of our own.’ That particular patient reminded me of my father, who is also a healthcare worker, and I still remember choking up. ...I held the hands of dying people who could not hold the hands of their spouses, children, siblings and friends. I listened to the president of the United States say on TV that all the hospitals and healthcare workers had everything they needed, while I was using a weeks-old N95 mask and waiting for a ventilator the hospital didn’t have for my patient. And at the end of every day, I came home to an empty apartment where I cried about the state of our world while sanitising my equipment...Many of these EMTs and paramedics have more than one job and work over 50 hours a week to support their families. I’ve seen people work 16 hours in a row at one job, then go work another eight hours at another out of necessity. Starting EMTs get paid \$15 an hour.”

On Wednesday, Kwei posted on Twitter that due to the massive support she had received, her employer had decided to not fire her.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Kwei explained that her OnlyFans account helped her survive, often providing the money she needed to be able to buy groceries after paying her rent. She added, “I think it says more about our country and our health care system that more and more health care workers are having to turn to OnlyFans or other means of sex work or other means of getting extra cash, the fact that they’re not getting what they need to make ends meet from the job that they’re dedicating their lives to.” A *BuzzFeed* article in October noted that the platform is increasingly being used by nursing students and health care workers who had been laid off during the pandemic, struggling to make ends meet and pay off their student debt.

In a significant expression of class solidarity, and the enormous social anger that has been building up among workers, a GoFundMe page set up for Kwei to cover the expenses for legal action against the *New York Post*, as

well as living expenses, has received over \$84,000 within just four days. Almost all of the money has come in from thousands of small donations, many from colleagues and health care workers from across the country as well as Canada, Germany, Britain and Switzerland. The comments reveal enormous anger not just about the gutter journalism of the *New York Post*, but also the staggering levels of social inequality and the treatment of health care workers in the pandemic.

Countless donors stated, “F*** the New York Post**.” One wrote, “Healthcare workers and essential workers should not become financially compromised by choosing their profession, they risk their lives every day. This young woman should be proud of standing up for her rights and shedding light on this gross inequality.”

A medical worker wrote: “NYC has let its Healthcare workers down for too long. As a pharmacy technician, I stand in solidarity with you and with all the other underpaid and abused Healthcare workers of this country.” Another donor wrote: “The fact that a healthcare worker needs a second job when a pandemic is ongoing is a scandal. What kind of job they take isn’t.” A nurse noted, “Former underpaid Paramedic, ICU RN, and Flight RN here. Currently in Advanced Practice. Read the article and was struck by the lack of journalistic integrity, and apparent smear campaign. They could have used your story to highlight the low compensation and lack of respect shown towards EMS instead of shaming you. Keep fighting the good fight.”

One donor said: “The current wages here in America are an insult to our working class and blue-collar workers. Barely offering a comfortable living without a mountain of debt (assuming you’re not single). People are overworked, their time undervalued and unappreciated.” Another wrote, “I hope you sue the crap out of the *NY Post*, but more importantly I hope that you never doubt yourself or feel any shame from a hypocritical society’s false moralities while it puts its people through impossible situations. The majority have your back, and those that would try to tear you down have much worse things hidden in their closets. Stand proud, you have fought for us, bled for us, cried for us, risked your life for us.”



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