New Democrats block anti-genocide candidate Sarah Jama from standing for party in Ontario election

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In the run-up to the February 27 Ontario provincial election, the supposed "progressive" alternative in Canadian politics—the New Democratic Party—has doubled down on its support for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. The party leadership has blocked former NDP MPP (Member of the Provincial Parliament) Sarah Jama from running under the party's banner, due to her statements of solidarity with the Palestinians. As a result, Jama has been forced to contest next week's Ontario provincial election as an "independent," "Love, Compassion and Care" candidate.

In October 2023, Jama, a rookie NDP MPP in Canada's most populous province for the working class seat of Hamilton Center, was relentlessly attacked by Conservative Premier Doug Ford as well as Liberal and fellow NDP members for her opposition to the developing genocide in Gaza. Her "crime," from the standpoint of the Canadian political establishment, was her issuing of a statement on X comparing the oppression of the Palestinians with apartheid and demanding an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.

As Israel's savage bombardment of Gaza got under way, Jama called for an immediate ceasefire and de-escalation. "We must look to the solution to this endless cycle of death and destruction: end all occupation of Palestinian land and end apartheid. Canada must hold true to its tradition of peacemaking, and refrain from military intervention. My heart genuinely goes out to all those impacted by this ongoing violence," she stated.

Jama's statement prompted a torrent of abuse and threats from all quarters of the establishment, and served as the starting gun for a smear campaign and ever deepening state assault on all anti-genocide protesters. This massive censorship drive was spearheaded by the Trudeau Liberal government and supported by the entire capitalist elite. Protests were violently broken up by police, activists were arrested, and all opponents of the genocide were branded "antisemites."

Right-wing forces raised the demand that Jama "go back to Somalia," her family's homeland. She was universally denounced by the capitalist media, hard-right Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Zionist organizations as an "antisemite" and a "defender of Hamas terrorists." Editors and columnists demanded that Jama remove her tweet, apologize and resign her seat.

In the past, Jama's statement would hardly have seemed exceptional. As numerous United Nations' resolutions have affirmed, Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands captured in the Six Day War of 1967—including its de facto imprisonment of 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza—is illegal. Prior to October 7, 2023, Israel's systematic and brutal regime of oppression against the Palestinians was described as akin to apartheid by many Israeli legal scholars and by Amnesty International, hardly an organization renowned for its radicalism. But today, under conditions in which the imperialist powers have fallen over each other to demonstrate their full-throated support for the far-right Netanyahu government's extermination of the Palestinians, such statements are deemed intolerable.

After death threats, continued abuse in the mainstream press and opposition from her own party leadership, Jama issued a short appendix to her initial tweet, stating, "I understand the pain that many Jewish and Israeli Canadians, including my own constituents, must be feeling. I apologize. To be clear, I unequivocally condemn terrorism by Hamas on thousands of Israeli civilians. I also believe that Israel's bombardment and siege on civilians in Gaza, as was also noted by the United Nations, is wrong."

Her retreat only encouraged the hard-right agitators, who stepped up their calls for Jama to resign. With no resignation forthcoming, Ford's government then moved to officially censure Jama, which removed her right to even speak in the legislature. This gag order was facilitated by the NDP, whose provincial leader, Marit Stiles, threw Jama out of the party's parliamentary caucus on the spurious basis that she had broken an "agreement" with Stiles designed to muzzle Jama on the Palestinian issue.

Jama courageously stated before she was censured:

> Those of us committed to Palestinian life refuse to be distracted. I restate my call for an immediate ceasefire by Israeli forces and for the immediate restoration of food, water, fuel and electricity in Gaza. I ground my words in the realities of the Israeli apartheid and Israel's ongoing domination and occupation of Palestinian lands. Governments and institutions in Canada are trying to use their voice and weight to silence us, to silence workers, students, educators and peace-loving people who dare to support Palestine.

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Ford's majority government then passed the censure motion, imposing the gag order that remains in force to this day. Jama continued to sit as an independent MPP until Ford called the snap election last month.

For her part, Jama does not seem able or even willing to draw the crucial lessons from the NDP's unbending support given to the genocidal Zionist project and the treacherous treatment meted out against her by her own party. Despite her principled words against the Israeli state, Jama continues to push dangerous illusions that the NDP—a party that supports capitalism, imperialist wars and regularly uses its votes to prop up big business, war mongering Liberal governments—can be reformed and made to see some sense in reversing its shameless abetting of the current bloodbath in Gaza.

Backed by many in her own Hamilton Center constituency, the poorest constituency by median income in the province, Jama applied in January to the party executive to be placed in the running for the nomination to represent the NDP in the upcoming election. In an interview, Jama pleaded that she continued to vote in support of virtually all the NDP's positions, and has tried to do everything possible to "repair the relationship" and rejoin the party, even though Stiles had already made it known that she would not accept her as a party candidate.

It would have been more appropriate for Jama to pose the question: why would a party that defends the Israeli state's "right to defend itself" via their brutal attack on Gaza that has destroyed hospitals, murdered healthcare workers, obliterated housing, destroyed schools and all other public infrastructure, killed, starved or disabled hundreds of thousands of innocent people and poisoned the environment have any real interest, beyond campaign rhetoric, in actually fighting for healthcare, housing, disabled rights or the environment anywhere else? Certainly, whenever the NDP has come to power in any of the Canadian provinces, the public services and living conditions of the working class have continued to deteriorate.

In the end, although an NDP nomination application package was cynically mailed to Jama upon her request, her completed application was summarily rejected by the party leadership. Instead, over the heads of local community activists and her own riding association, the party chose Hamilton physician Robin Lennox as its nominee. Jama then announced she would stand as a "grass roots" independent in the election—albeit on virtually the same program as the NDP.

Fearing that the treatment of Jama by her own party has alienated a layer of NDP voters in the province, sections of the trade union bureaucracy and various pseudo-left political groupings have called for a vote for Jama in Hamilton Center, but a vote, nonetheless, for the NDP everywhere else. These include the Hamilton Labour Council, which was represented at Jama's election campaign launch, Fred Hahn, the Ontario President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and Ontario Federation of Labour Secretary-treasurer Ahmad Gaied. The NDP's Socialist Caucus, led by the arch-Pabloite anti-Trotskyist Barry Weisleder and his Socialist Action group, has also endorsed Jama.

The NDP's attempted "cancellation" of Jama is typical for a party that has consistently barred pro-Palestinian candidates from contesting elections on the party ticket, and suppressed discussion of pro-Palestinian motions and resolutions at its conventions. At the federal level, with the full support of the trade union bureaucracy, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, who occasionally sheds a few crocodile tears over the slaughter in Gaza, has secured for years the parliamentary viability of the pro-war, big business Trudeau government. The Liberal government has been no less emphatic in its support for the Israeli regime than the Biden and Trump administrations. During the entire period of the witch-hunt against Jama, Singh has refused to speak in her defense.

The critical task facing young people and workers outraged by the NDP's bitter hostility to the rights of the Palestinians, outrageous censoring of Jama, and contempt for democratic rights is to draw a political balance sheet of—and break from—this right-wing party of austerity and war. Like social democratic parties around the world, the NDP long ago abandoned even the most tenuous association with a reformist program aimed at ameliorating capitalism's worst excesses in favour of an open embrace of unrestrained corporate profiteering and imperialist war.

The continuing genocide in Gaza and the expansion of Netanyahu's war to the West Bank and Lebanon, with the unquestioning support of all the western powers, underscores that the orientation of those organizing the anti-genocide, pro-Palestinian protests towards pressuring the Liberal-NDP-union alliance to change course is a dead end. The fight to put an end to the genocide requires a turn not to the powers that be, who are enabling mass suffering and death, but to the working class, the only social force capable of stopping war and genocide. The struggle against war and imperialist barbarism must be aimed at its root, the capitalist system. The urgent task for those seeking an end to the Gaza genocide is to build a mass anti-war movement led by the working class to fight for the socialist transformation of society.

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