Ontario’s York Region fires paramedic for her opposition to the Gaza genocide

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4 July 2025

The York Region municipal government in Ontario fired paramedic Katherine Grzejszczak last month for speaking out against Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians and its war crimes in the Middle East.

Commenting on a Facebook post from CUPE Ontario, the Ontario division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, with which the York Region paramedics are affiliated, Grzejszczak wrote:

> In the last 2 years, Israel has bombed Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and now Iran. They have been occupying Palestine for 75+ years. They are luring starving Palestinian children to their concentration camp food aid depots so they can snipe them dead.
>
> They keep murdering workers—media, healthcare, municipal—they just mass murdered 15 first responders, including 7 paramedics. Any union or other organization that doesn’t fight this is choosing to stay silent ruing genocide.
>
> Thanks CUPE Ontario and Toronto and York Region Labour Council for asking members to join these demonstrations, to stop the bombing of Iran. You’re one of the few who stand in solidarity with workers.

CUPE Ontario’s post was promoting an anti-war demonstration against the Israeli war of aggression against Iran. The backing extended by sections of the local and provincial union leadership for such protests, while remaining silent on the CUPE bureaucracy’s and the CUPE-sponsored New Democratic Party’s unstinting support for the Liberal government is deeply cynical. Under Justin Trudeau and now Mark Carney, the Liberal government has supplied Israel with military equipment, politically supported its ever-expanding war across the Middle East, and cracked down viciously against opponents of the genocide, while smearing them as antisemites.

Nevertheless, the anti-war demonstration, and Grzejszczak’s entirely factual—and far from complete—account of Israel’s criminality enraged Zionists and Canadian imperialists who whipped up a smear campaign to get her fired.

Prominent among these activists was the fascistic Zionist activist Dhalia Kurtz, who helped instigate the prosecution and persecution of radical journalist Yves Engler, along with far-right Zionist Montreal Conservative politician Neil Oberman, who offers up his services as a lawyer to conduct “lawfare” campaigns to silence critics of Israel’s genocide.

Kurtz has also promoted outright Nazis demanding mass deportations of immigrants and Muslims.

But the campaign’s most important players are right-wing local politicians. City of Vaughan Councilor Gila Martow, a Zionist with deep roots in Israel’s settler movement, boasted in a Facebook post of her own that she contacted Mayor Steven Del Duca, a former leader of the Ontario Liberal Party who has emerged as a vicious opponent of the Palestinian national liberation struggle, and a political thug for Zionist genocide. Del Duca then contacted the Chair of York Region, Eric Jolliffe. (Vaughn is a city in York Region.)

Chris Spearen, the “Chief and General Manager of Paramedic and Seniors Services at the Regional Municipality of York” was enlisted to do the dirty work and fired Grzejszczak. Perversely, York Region is justifying its dismissal using the shop-worn language of the pseudo-left.

According to spokesman Patrick Casey, “York Region remains committed to fostering welcoming and inclusive communities, as affirmed by the Inclusion Charter for York Region.”

Grzejszczak’s dismissal is a blatant and transparent violation of her Charter—that is constitutional—right to free speech and constitutes an attack on the entire working class. In addition to being a paramedic, Grzejszczak is an active member of CUPE Local 4900 and is an elected member of CUPE Ontario’s 21-member executive board.

Her firing has been widely condemned. York Region has received over 18,900 complaint letters, in a campaign organized by “Labour 4 Palestine” the “solidarity” organization of the union bureaucracy.

The firing of Grzejszczak is part of a global assault by the ruling elites in all of the major imperialist powers against the mass opposition and disgust voiced by millions of people to Israel’s imperialist-backed slaughter in Gaza. In Germany, the US, Britain, and elsewhere, protests have been banned, activists deported and detained, and meetings shut down by governments desperate to silence opposition to their complicity in the most horrific crimes since the Nazis. Media-orchestrated witch-hunts against artists, cultural figures, and others who have used public platforms to speak out against the genocide have accompanied and helped fuel these state-led provocations.

The victimization of Katherine Grzejszczak for her opposition to genocide and the illegal US-Israeli attack on Iran is being celebrated by the far-right which desires to silence all opposition to the escalating class-war assault on the working conditions, wages and livelihoods of workers in every country. It must be resisted by the international working class. The Socialist Equality Party, the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, demands Grzejszczak’s immediate reinstatement with full back pay.

CUPE Ontario has filed a grievance and is publicly calling for her

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reinstatement. Its president, Fred Hahn, has also faced a vicious right-wing campaign to remove him from his position due to his mild condemnations of Israel's crimes. "When people speak out against injustice, and war and genocide, they ought not to fear for their own livelihoods," he said to the CBC. He characterized Grzejszczak's dismissal as "deeply problematic."

That over-used euphemism was employed as part of a right-wing campaign from within CUPE's national leadership and led by its national president, Mark Hancock, that sought to smear Hahn as an "antisemite" and remove him from the union's National Executive Board (NEB) for re-posting a social media video which condemned the genocide.

While Hahn successfully stood his ground against the demand for his dismissal from the NEB, he had previously removed the post and issued a grovelling apology.

The dismissal of Katherine Grzejszczak for her political views raises fundamental political questions for the working class that must be carefully worked through. Workers must understand what social forces are attacking basic democratic rights and why, and what social forces have the class interest and the ability to defend these rights?

The genocide of the Palestinians is a component part of the ongoing imperialist campaign of war to re-divide the world. Beset by a world capitalist system lurching from crisis to crisis, American and Canadian imperialism are openly planning for a war with China, and waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. The Canadian ruling class is set to more than double spending on war, and preparing to massively slash social spending and the public sector workforce. It is attacking the rights of immigrants and refugees. In every respect, it is adapting itself to the emergent fascist dictatorship in the United States, upon which it depends to advance its own predatory imperialist interests.

The wages and conditions of the working class are being attacked across the board. Rotten concession contracts are being forced onto angry and resistant workers in every economic sector, with the assistance of the government and the trade union bureaucracy. Income and wealth inequality are skyrocketing.

The continued accumulation of obscene wealth by a handful of billionaire oligarchs and the waging of world war are incompatible with democratic forms of rule. Democracy stands in the way, and so the ruling class is dispensing with it.

The working class must understand that there is no section of the ruling class which has a material interest in defending basic democratic rights. The vast chasm which has opened up between the working class and the capitalist ruling class over the genocide in Gaza is a political expression of the vast material gulf that has already existed for some time, and which grows wider every day. In its attack against basic democratic rights, the ruling class is organizing a political realignment to correspond with the underlying social inequality and oligarchic character of society.

Chris Spearen, the functionary who dismissed Katherine Grzejszczak is on Ontario's 'Sunshine List' which records the salaries of public officials who earn more than $100,000 per year. Since 2014, his salary has more than doubled.

Spearen's salary is nearly identical to the salary of CUPE National President Hancock, who earns $211,000 per year. City of Vaughan Mayor Stephen Del Duca's salary is $209,000.

York Region paramedics, who are highly skilled professionals trained to save human lives, make less than half of this amount, between $84,000 and $102,000. The average income of a worker in Ontario is $58,700 before taxes.

These meagre incomes are not enough to buy a house in York Region. The price of an average house in Newmarket is now $1,044,000. Mortgage brokers recommend that in order to buy a one-million-dollar house, one should have an income of at least $217,000, and preferably $280,000. The price of food rose 3.8 percent in April, a figure which conceals the massive increase in the price of basic staple goods. These impossible conditions threaten to create a social explosion between workers who live in one world, and the capitalist ruling class who float far above it.

The capitalist ruling class thus fears any expression of opposition from workers. But the trade union bureaucracy will not give it either a voice or any political leadership. Just the opposite is true. The social process which Trotsky noted in 1940, that the "one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of the modern trade union organizations… is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power" is today fully expressed. The CUPE leadership, like that of Unifor, the Steelworkers and the Canadian Labor Congress, is fundamentally hostile to the very workers it claims to represent, because its leaders and functionaries constitute a privileged social caste, ever more integrated into the state and corporate management. This social reality is illustrated by the repeated sellouts of workers' struggles orchestrated by the CUPE bureaucracy and other union leaderships, such as the 2022 Ontario education suppo rt workers strike and the ongoing postal workers' struggle.

The defence of workers' democratic rights is inseparable from the building of a mass movement in the working class in Canada and internationally against genocide and imperialist war. This requires a decisive political break from the union bureaucracy and its political mouthpiece—the New Democratic Party. These forces have consistently bolstered the authority of the pro-war, pro-genocide Liberal government as a "progressive" alternative to the Tories and a friend of workers. Even now, they beat the drums of trade war by whipping up the same foul Canadian nationalism trumpeted by former central banker and Prime Minister Mark Carney in the economic conflict with the United States so as to dragoon workers behind their "own" ruling class.

Class-conscious workers must respond by taking up the fight for an industrial and political counteroffensive by workers across North America against war and austerity, and for decent-paying, secure jobs, and the protection of workers' rights to express their opinions as they please without fear of dismissal or persecution. The necessary program to animate such a fight is the socialist internationalism fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and its co-thinkers throughout the ICFI.

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