

Portland, Maine, nurse released from ICE detention

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Debora Kapisha, a medical-surgical nurse at Maine Medical Center in Portland, has been released after spending a week in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Kapisha, an asylum seeker originally from Zambia, was kidnapped by ICE agents on July 30 while passing through a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint at Portland International Jetport. Her attorney, Kerry Doyle, told the *Portland Press Herald* that an agent claimed Kapisha's luggage needed to be inspected in another room. ICE agents were waiting inside to seize her in what Doyle described as an apparently targeted operation.

Kapisha had a pending asylum application and valid authorization to work in the United States. MaineHealth, the owner of Maine Medical Center, reportedly understood that her employment authorization was valid until 2030.

ICE nevertheless accused Kapisha of overstaying a visa that expired on November 13, 2024. "Any pending application does not confer legal status," a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson declared.

The statement expresses the deliberately coercive character of the asylum system. A pending application does not by itself provide lawful immigration status, even when an asylum seeker has government authorization to work while the claim is reviewed. The government can allow a worker to staff a hospital for years while simultaneously asserting the power to arrest her, imprison her and place her in deportation proceedings before deciding whether she is entitled to asylum.

Kapisha was detained in Massachusetts and faced transfer to Louisiana, far from her family, attorney, coworkers and support network. Such transfers are a standard ICE tactic. Moving detainees hundreds or

thousands of miles makes it more difficult to obtain counsel, communicate with relatives and challenge detention.

Kapisha filed a challenge in federal court. A judge initially barred ICE from transferring her outside New England before a scheduled hearing. She was released on August 6 as her immigration case continued.

Her release followed an outpouring of support from nurses and the surrounding community. The Maine State Nurses Association, an affiliate of National Nurses United (NNU), said more than 200 nurses, community supporters and elected officials rallied outside Maine Medical Center on August 5 to demand her freedom and block the threatened transfer.

"Nursing is really hard, and we can't succeed without each other," Sarah Shaw, a nurse who works on the same floor as Kapisha, told the *Press Herald*. "We show up for each other... Having Debora taken away from us—it's like having a family member taken."

After her release, Kapisha issued a brief statement through her coworkers: "Thank you for all your love and support. I am so thankful to be home and can't wait to return to my co-workers and patients."

NNU called Kapisha's release a demonstration of the power of organized nurses. "Nurses in Maine found out one of their own was locked up and sprung into action to get her out," the union said. It called for the release of everyone in ICE detention and the abolition of what it described as a "fascist agency of secret police."

Kapisha's kidnapping was part of an expanding immigration dragnet at US airports. Maine immigrant advocates reported that at least five people were detained at the Portland jetport during a two-week period.

The operation has been facilitated by a May 2025 information-sharing agreement between ICE and the

TSA. Internal ICE data reviewed by Reuters showed that the TSA provided the immigration Gestapo with records on more than 31,000 travelers between Trump's return to office and February 2026. ICE arrested more than 800 people based on those leads.

Kapisha is seeking asylum from Zambia, a copper-rich southern African country of approximately 20 million people where enormous mineral wealth exists alongside mass poverty.

Zambia, which has poverty rates among the highest in the world, is in debt distress. With a gross domestic product of roughly \$30 billion, it has at least \$12 billion in outstanding external debt—and unofficial estimates place the real figure at double that amount, including off-balance-sheet Chinese loans for infrastructure deals. The government spends nearly half of its tax revenues on debt servicing, leaving virtually nothing for social spending after paying public sector wages.

Zambia defaulted on its Eurobonds in November 2020 and has also accumulated arrears with other creditors. After four and a half years of negotiations, Zambia has yet to reach a deal with some private creditors, including UK-based Standard Chartered.

The country's food and energy costs are high, its poverty and inequality substantial. Unemployment—particularly among young people—is a major concern. A just-concluded presidential election, which kept the ruling oligarchy in power, was characterized by procedural irregularities and violence against the opposition figures, including the arrest of 11 oppositionists.

Immigrant workers such as Kapisha form a vital layer of the US health care workforce. They are heavily represented among nurses, nursing assistants, home health aides, custodial workers and food service employees. Hospitals and nursing homes depend on their labor while the immigration system keeps them under the constant threat of detention and deportation.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reported in April 2026 on ICE activity at Michigan healthcare facilities, an estimated 29 percent of the state's custodial and maintenance workers and 9 percent of its hospital workers overall are immigrants. These workers do not fill marginal positions—they keep hospitals functioning by cleaning operating rooms, transporting patients, preparing meals and providing direct patient care as nurses, nursing assistants and home health

aides.

The Trump administration has escalated the attack on these workers. On January 21, 2025, the Department of Homeland Security rescinded a 2021 memorandum that had designated hospitals, schools and churches as “sensitive areas” generally protected from immigration enforcement. Healthcare facilities can now be directly targeted by ICE and Customs and Border Protection.

The detention and possible deportation of Kapisha, a hardworking and well-respected nurse employed at a major hospital in a profession that is in desperate need of skilled workers, serves to highlight both the absurdity and the criminality of the frankly xenophobic campaign against immigrants by all segments of the ruling oligarchy in the US. It yet again exposes the bald-faced lie that the anti-immigrant campaign solely targets the “worst of the worst.”

The enthusiastic support demonstrated by Kapisha's coworkers at Maine Medical Center is a clear illustration of class solidarity. While her own status has not yet been determined, the savage assault on the immigrant working class, and ultimately the entire working class, is made clear.

It will take a lot more than a few demonstrations to counter the attack that is rapidly expanding. As recent nurse strikes in New York, California, Michigan and elsewhere demonstrate, the established unions will not undertake more than token efforts to defend these vital healthcare workers from exploitation. Only the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, run by workers themselves, can mount the necessary revolt against a capitalist system headed toward disaster.



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