

February 23, 2024

Via email

Lisa Philipps
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Rhonda Lenton
President, York University
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Dear Provost Philipps and President Lenton:

Re: Reinstatement of Professor Lesley Wood

We write you today to demand the immediate and full reinstatement of Professor Lesley Wood to her position in the Department of Sociology at York University. Professor Wood, a researcher of social movements and protest whose work has been awarded by both the Canadian Sociological Association and York University itself,¹ was suspended by the York University administration on November 23, 2023 after she was criminally charged for alleged participation in nonviolent protest activity, charges for which she has not been convicted and with respect to which she is presumed innocent. As the oldest and most active civil liberties organization in the country, with a mandate to promote civil liberties and human rights in BC and across Canada, the BC Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) has deep concerns about the consequences of Professor Wood's suspension for academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Professor Wood's suspension threatens academic freedom at York University and well beyond it, undermining the fundamental right – indeed, the core responsibility – of academics to freely speak out about public matters as citizens and members of the academic community without fear of reprisal. As the professor is accused of taking part in a protest action supporting a longstanding campaign against the HESEG Foundation for Lone Soldiers and opposing the state of Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza, her suspension further contributes to the chilly environment

¹ Professor Wood's book, *Direct Action, Deliberation, and Diffusion: Collective Action After the WTO Protests in Seattle* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) was awarded the 2013 John Porter Tradition of Excellence Book Award from the Canadian Sociological Association. Professor Wood also received the York University LA&PS Faculty Award for Distinction in Research, Emerging Researcher Category (2014) and the York University "Research Leader" Recognition (2013-14).

in respect of expressing pro-Palestinian views on Canadian university campuses. This chill existed before the events of October 7 and Israel's subsequent military operations,² and one Canadian political scientist recently described it as "the greatest threat to free expression and academic freedom in [his] lifetime."³

We note that this suspension is contrary to the [CAUT policy on Academic Staff and Criminal Conviction](#), which indicates that being charged with a crime can only ground a suspension "where [the accused's] presence on campus poses a clear, serious and imminent danger" to another member of the university. Even if all the allegations against Professor Wood were proven facts, it is difficult to discern how her presence on campus could pose a serious and imminent danger to any other member of the university community.

In place of this clear standard, which the facts of this case cannot meet, Professor Wood's suspension seems to be grounded in a much less speech-protective notion of "community safety". This subjective, broad notion not only erodes the protection of faculty members' stigmatized speech but also creates uncertainty regarding when faculty members can expect York University to defend their free expression and academic freedom and when they will be punished for nonviolent political speech. This can only exacerbate the chilling effect of York University's actions.

It is our expectation and sincere hope that York University, like all other universities in Canada and internationally, will uphold and strongly defend the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression. Accordingly, we ask that you act in accordance with these principles by immediately and fully reinstating Professor Wood.

Sincerely,



Liza Hughes (she/they)
Executive Director
BC Civil Liberties Association



Aislin Jackson (she/they)
Policy Staff Counsel
BC Civil Liberties Association

cc: Paul Tsaparis, Chair, Board of Governors, c/o Pascal Robichaud, University Secretary, York University, pascalr@yorku.ca

JJ McMurtry, Dean, Faculty of LAPS, York University, deanlaps@yorku.ca

Mark Thomas, Chair, Department of Sociology, York University, socchair@yorku.ca

² As documented in Independent Jewish Voices Canada's October 2022 report "[Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada](#)" by Sheryl Nestel and Rowan Gaudet.

³ Quote from Blayne Haggart's "[Academic Freedom, Weaponized Antisemitism, and the Big Chill](#)", posted to the blog of the Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University on 12 January 2024.