

Cornell students and faculty hold meeting to defend immigrants' rights

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12 February 2025

On Monday, hundreds of students and faculty at Cornell University held a meeting in a packed auditorium to discuss the Trump administration's attack on immigrants and the suppression of democratic rights on college campuses.

Recently, Cornell became a major target of attacks on both immigrant students and democratic rights. In September of 2024, Cornell PhD student Momodou Taal was suspended and threatened with deportation for his participation in pro-Palestinian protests on Cornell's campus.

After challenging Cornell's attempt to remove him from the country, Taal was permitted to complete his degree program, although with some restrictions. Both on Cornell's campus and beyond, students and faculty rallied to Taal's defense and opposed the attempt to expel him from the school and the country.

The meeting featured a panel of experts who spoke on the implications of Trump's executive orders, the history of anti-immigrant attacks in the US and resistance to them, and the legal questions involved in the suppression of students' democratic rights. The speakers included Eric Lee, a leading immigration attorney who has argued on behalf of immigrants before the US Supreme Court. Lee served as Taal's legal counsel in his fight against deportation. He also represents Will Lehman in his case against the United Auto Workers for fraud in the union's last national election.

Other speakers at the event included Derek Chang, a professor of history who focuses on Asian American studies, Joe Margulies, an attorney who represents detainees at Guantanamo Bay, and Shannon Gleeson, professor of Global Labor and Work in Latino Studies.

Lee opened the meeting with a detailed report on the actions of the Trump White House since taking office in January. He said, "The executive orders issued by the Trump administration in the last three weeks are an attempt to overturn the Bill of Rights and the separation of powers and transform the country into a presidential dictatorship."

He continued:

Under the false pretense that unarmed immigrants are involved in an invasion, Trump has arrogated for himself wartime powers, prepared the invocation of the Insurrection Act and Alien Enemies Act, ordered the Pentagon to prepare battle plans for deployment on US soil, attempted to take the power of the purse from Congress, stripped birthright citizenship in direct violation of the 14th Amendment and deputized the FBI and certain local police to hunt and detain immigrants.

Lee explained that Trump's orders go well beyond attacks on immigrants alone and include a sweeping suppression of free speech:

The first order declares that immigrants who "espouse hateful ideology" or "express hostile attitudes towards American citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles" must be denied entry or deported from the country. It requires federal law enforcement to surveil and monitor not only the political views of non-citizens applying for visas to enter the country, but also the views of those who already live, work, and attend school here, where the First Amendment undoubtedly applies.

He then turned to the question of what must be done to oppose the transformation of the US into a dictatorship, saying:

The attorneys are doing what we can to provide as much protection as lawfully possible to students and faculty whose speech is being chilled by these executive orders. But what is your duty?

The fate of these students and democratic rights will ultimately be decided not by the legal system, where Clarence Thomas, Sam Alito and Trump's three nominees have the final say... And it is also clear to increasing numbers of people that democratic rights will not be protected by the Democratic Party, which has essentially acquiesced to Trump and is collaborating with elements of the attack on immigrants, including by providing votes for Rubio, Noem and the Laken Riley Act.

What will determine the outcome of this struggle is the response of the population. You must protect your rights to free speech and association by exercising those rights actively and vigorously here on campus and beyond. Establish a committee, build a network, develop an organization that reaches broadly into the surrounding community, including among farm workers and other sections of the working class targeted by Trump's orders.

Lee then referenced the 1851 "Jerry Rescue," where abolitionists in nearby Syracuse organized a mass protest to free escaped slave William "Jerry" Henry, who had been arrested by slave catchers. The population succeeded in liberating Henry and he was able to live free for the rest of his life.

Lee quoted the abolitionist Reverend Samuel May, who participated in the rescue:

When the people saw a man dragged through the streets, chained and held down in a cart by four or six others who were upon him; Treated as if he were the worst of felons; And learned that it was only because he had assumed to be what God had made him to be,

a man, and not a slave - when this came to be known throughout the streets, there was a mighty throbbing of the public heart; an all but unanimous uprising against the outrage... Indignation flashed from every eye. Abhorrence of the Fugitive Slave Bill poured in burning words from every tongue. The very stones cried out.

Lee concluded with the following call:

Whether Trump is able to use your town and your university as a springboard for dictatorship will depend on your response in the coming days and weeks. Through your lawful actions and through a deepened political understanding of the historic, democratic issues at stake, you can send a message to the country and the world that the American population will not allow the descent into dictatorship.

Following Lee, Professor Chang spoke on the history of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the parallels to Trump's attacks on immigrants today. He explained that restrictive immigration laws are used intentionally to keep immigrant laborers in precarious situations so that they can be heavily exploited.

"2025 in relation to its treatment of migrants looks awfully familiar," Chang said. He recalled that Chinese immigrants were made to carry special documents and would be arrested and detained if they were found to be traveling without proper paperwork.

He explained:

Chinese migrants were barred from the right to naturalization, a right reserved only to free whites until 1870, and then extended only to people born in Africa and of African ancestry. This meant that Chinese migrants did not have access to the full breadth of rights that theoretically were available to American citizens.

He ended his remarks by saying that "the long history of white nationalist and anti-migrant activity tells us that we might have been here before. But it also tells us that communities of color and working class communities are actually in this all together."

Joe Margulies spoke next on his experience as a civil rights lawyer defending the rights of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. He said:

When I saw the Trump administration invoke Guantanamo as a response to what it perceives as this crisis, it occurred to me that to Donald Trump, Guantanamo is not a noun, it is a verb. It is not a place, it is a condition to be endured. He uses it this way: "I'm going to Guantanamo this SOB." To Guantanamo is to cast out. To be Guantanomoed is to be treated as vermin. There is no reason to place anyone at Guantanamo except to cast them out.

He explained that the use of Guantanamo Bay as a detention center is for the sole purpose of exiling a section of the population that is considered less than human. He then described the current conditions at the Guantanamo Bay base.

There is no legal justification for circumventing the Immigration

Act and bringing immigrants to Guantanamo. There's no justification for it under the law, period. It's a prison. There is solitary confinement. They are held in cells 23 hours a day... There are acres and acres of unused space. They could put tens of thousands of people there if they wanted... But what the Trump administration really wants to do is to create a place where it can cast anyone it wants beyond the reach of the law and of the protections that come by virtue of our shared humanity. They want to create a place where we can treat people as if they are not human beings.

He concluded by issuing a stark warning:

I am a lawyer. I use the law. I invoke the law to try and protect my clients...But the law is not your protector. The law will not save us from this moment. What will save us is what is happening in this room.

The last speaker on the panel was Professor Shannon Gleeson. She emphasized that the attacks on immigrants are not unique to Trump and have continued to escalate over the course of Democratic as well as Republican administrations. She recalled the history of immigration legislation over the past 100 years, including the 1921 and 1924 national origins quotas acts, which prioritized granting visas to immigrants from Western Europe.

"Operation Wetback in 1954 set the stage for us to open and close borders as economies and growers mandated," she said, explaining the domination of profit concerns over immigration policy.

She continued:

The 1986 amnesty was the last time the US had a legalization program. But the one hand giveth, the other taketh away... In addition to amnesty we created the most effective portal to deportation, the employment sanctions policy.

Gleeson made clear that the designation of individuals as "illegal" is essentially a fiction. She said that "the creation of 'illegal,' 'undocumented,' or 'unauthorized' individuals is just that, a social creation, and at many points in history has been undone."

She added, "If we think about the mechanisms today that are blocking our ability to create a pathway to citizenship, we have to look squarely at the Democratic Party." She explained that in the mid-1990s, under Bill Clinton, Congress passed a slew of laws that both restricted immigration and escalated the criminalization of immigrants.

In addition to the standing room only onsite audience, there were many online participants. This included the persecuted Cornell student Momodou Taal, who addressed the meeting. Taal recalled his experience of protesting against the Israeli genocide in Gaza and then being issued a suspension by the university.

He described the "cold and cynical" process of being summoned to an administrator's office to face suspension and deportation:

She [the administrator] appeared on a wide screen TV and read a list of supposed violations of the student code of conduct. She pronounced a judgment without allowing me to respond to the allegations. I was set to be de-enrolled from the university, after

which I would be given 48 hours to pack my bags and await deportation.

Taal explained that he was stripped of his right to access university facilities such as the Muslim prayer center and campus healthcare facilities. “The university’s posture suggested that prioritizing the financial interests of corporations, including weapons manufacturers, outweighed the moral right to protest what I consider to be a genocide,” he said.

Denouncing the witch hunts by Congress against universities where pro-Palestinian demonstrations had taken place, Taal remarked that higher education institutions are “no longer viewed as spaces for intellectual inquiry and critical thought, but rather as entities that must align with state-sponsored agendas.”

All the speakers at the meeting were enthusiastically applauded by the audience at the conclusion of their remarks. Students posed questions to the panelists and discussed with them how to begin planning and building organizations to resist efforts to attack the campus.

Student organizers of the meeting distributed a Pledge to Resist Immigrant Repression and Deportation on Cornell’s Campus for attendees to sign and share among their peers. The pledge reads:

As a member of Cornell’s community, I pledge to actively support students, faculty, and staff who are targeted by the federal administration’s policy proposals. I reject the fear, suspicion, and repression that such cruel and hateful policies seek to foster. I oppose criminalization measures such as raids and deportations, and I will work with others to build a genuine community of belonging, full participation, and freedom of expression for all students, staff, and faculty at Cornell.



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