

Nearly 100 arrested inside Trump Tower, as protests spread against detention of Mahmoud Khalil

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Attend the IYSSE's public meetings this week, "Free Mahmoud Khalil!": Friday, March 14 at 6:30 p.m. at The Center (208 W 13th St., Room 310, New York City) and online Saturday with the Educators Rank-and-File Committee. Click here to register for the online meeting.

Nearly 100 demonstrators from the anti-Zionist group Jewish Voice for Peace were arrested Thursday after they filled the lobby of Trump Tower in New York City, demanding the release of Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil. The former Columbia graduate student was detained outside his Manhattan home by agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) the previous Saturday night.

Also on Thursday, Columbia University, which has close ties to the Democratic Party, suspended, expelled or revoked degrees from 22 students involved in protests against the Gaza genocide last year. The extraordinary action came the same day as a letter from the White House demanded disciplinary action as a "precondition" for negotiations over "Columbia University's continued financial relationship with the United States government."

There are also reports that ICE agents have visited other residences in the Columbia University area looking for additional targets for detention.

The detention of Khalil has provoked increasing outrage in New York City, across America and around the world. More than 3 million people have signed an online petition demanding Khalil's release, and an online fundraising effort for his legal defense surpassed its goal of \$250,000 by Wednesday and is now close to doubling the target.

Khalil was taken from the arms of his wife, who is eight months pregnant, and flown 1,300 miles to a privately run prison facility in Louisiana. For nearly half a day, neither his wife nor his attorneys knew where he was: Khalil had been effectively "disappeared" by the Trump administration's immigration Gestapo. ICE refused to allow Khalil's lawyers to have proper contact with him until ordered to do so by a federal judge Wednesday.

Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who was unanimously confirmed by the US Senate earlier this year, have made it clear that Khalil has not been arrested for committing a crime but for voicing opinions that put him at odds with US foreign policy in the Middle East. Trump has given the Netanyahu government a green light to "clean out" the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip and resettle it.

In the Trump Tower protest, about 300 demonstrators from Jewish Voice for Peace began to fill up the lobby of the building at lunchtime. They then removed their overcoats to show red T-shirts with anti-Zionist and anti-genocide slogans, including "Jews say stop arming Israel," "Jews say Free Mahmoud & Free Palestine," "Not in Our Name" and "Fight Nazis Not Students."

Trump Tower security called the New York Police Department, and Chief John Chell personally supervised the deployment of dozens of cops, while orders to cease the protest and disperse were broadcast over the building's loudspeakers. Nearly half the demonstrators decided to stay in defiance of the order and be arrested in order to make a public show of support for Mahmoud Khalil. They were arrested, zip-tied and loaded into police vans and a city bus to take them away for booking on misdemeanor charges.

A statement from Jewish Voice for Peace said the protesters included rabbis, descendants of Holocaust survivors, as well as some public officials and celebrities. Speaking to the press, Jane Hirschmann, granddaughter and niece of Holocaust victims, said:

The abduction of Mahmoud Khalil by the Trump regime is further proof that we are on the brink of a full takeover by an authoritarian regime. As Jews of conscience, we know our history and we know where this leads. This is what fascists do as they cement control.

Actress Debra Winger was one of those arrested. She told the Associated Press:

I'm just standing up for my rights, and I'm standing up for Mahmoud Khalil, who has been abducted illegally and taken to an undisclosed location. Does that sound like America to you?

Columbia University Professor James Schamus, who is Jewish, told the *New York Times* that the claim that the campus was “somehow a hotbed of antisemitic intolerance” was ridiculous. He said:

We all know that if anything, Columbia is a hotbed of students raising their voice and conscience, and in protest against the inhumane policies that this regime is imposing.

The Trump Tower protest comes a day after more than 1,000 demonstrators gathered in Foley Square to show their support for Khalil during a federal court hearing on his lawyers’ motion for a writ of *habeas corpus*, the most basic constitutional right that an individual can assert against the state. Federal District Judge Jesse Furman delayed arguments on the writ until after Khalil’s lawyers could consult with their client directly, a process which began Wednesday night.

The lawyers on both sides must file further papers with the court on Friday outlining how they propose to proceed with the case. The Trump administration conceded in court that Khalil could not be deported until after the federal case is decided but sought to have the case removed from New York to New Jersey or Louisiana, expecting, particularly in the latter location, to have a more right-wing district judge and court of appeals.

Khalil’s attorney Amy Greer appeared Wednesday night on NBC’s “Top Story with Tom Llamas” and said the Trump administration was violating the Constitution. She said:

This is not what we’re used to in this country, and it is directly counter to our Constitution that people should just be taken, not heard from again, moved halfway across the country without anybody knowing why or where or how or what the justification is.

Llamas compared this to the “disappearing” of anti-government protesters in Argentina and other Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s, when the victims were tortured and in many cases taken up in helicopters and thrown into the sea.

The seizure of Khalil marks a major escalation in the Trump administration’s drive to establish a presidential dictatorship. The attack on Khalil is part of a broader crackdown on opposition, with universities being transformed into police zones, where students who speak out against genocide face state repression. These methods—disappearances, mass arrests and rule by decree—have historically been used by fascist regimes to crush political dissent and prepare for even greater crimes.

The Democratic Party stands with the Trump administration on this issue, as on every other question where the vital interests of American imperialism are concerned. There have been a few verbal and written protests but merely for the record. Behind the scenes, and in many cases quite openly, leading Democrats support the arrest and deportation of Mahmoud Khalil and the repression of anyone who opposes the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, which was funded and equipped by the Democratic Biden administration for more than a year.

The working class must intervene. The outrage over Khalil’s arrest must be transformed into mass protests and strikes against Trump’s dictatorship. Students cannot fight alone—this struggle must be taken into the workplaces, linking the fight for democratic rights to the fight against social inequality, war and the capitalist system itself.

A distribution of *World Socialist Web Site* statements at the Dana auto parts plant in the Detroit suburb of Warren Thursday was met with a powerful response from workers. Khalil is a former member of the United Auto Workers as a university graduate student.

A veteran worker said, “Hopefully, we can get Mr. Khalil back. The Republicans and the right wingers are bad people, and the Democrats are just weenies and taking it.” Another young Dana worker added, “Free Mahmoud! Every UAW member should go on strike to protest this. This is just downright cruel.”



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