

Detroit autoworkers call for Mahmoud Khalil's release and fight to defend free speech

Jerry White
13 March 2025

Join the upcoming online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (US), "Free Mahmoud Khalil! Mobilize the working class against Trump's dictatorship! Defend the right to public education!" on Saturday, March 15, at 12:00 p.m. EDT. Register here.

Workers at the Dana auto parts plant in the Detroit suburb of Warren, Michigan, denounced the Trump administration's seizure and threatened deportation of Mahmoud Khalil, the 30-year-old Columbia University graduate and Palestinian activist who is being held in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Louisiana. Workers at the plant are members of the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Khalil, a former member of the UAW in higher education, has been targeted for his role in last year's demonstrations at Columbia University protesting the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. A permanent legal resident of the US who is married to an American citizen, Khalil faces deportation in what Trump threatens to be thousands of more arrests and deportations for allegedly "anti-American" activities.

A campaign team distributed the WSWs editorial board statement "Free Mahmoud Khalil! Mobilize the working class against Trump's dictatorship" to Dana workers Thursday afternoon and discussed the implications of this attack for the whole working class.

A Dana worker sitting in his car denounced the threat to deport Khalil, saying, "The whole point of America is you're supposed to have freedom of speech. Doesn't matter what the government thinks is wrong. So, the fact that you're going to try to deport him for what he's saying, you're a traitor to America, in my opinion."

Asked if he saw this as setting a precedent to suppress the rights of the whole working class, he said, "Are you kidding me? The next step is getting rid of collective

bargaining. They don't want us to be able to band together, black people, white people, brown people, all of us are in the same boat. We all are laborers. We all workers. They don't want us to be able to band together, and that's our only power, against corporations, against billionaires, against anyone that wants to use the United States government to deport people who disagree with them."

"Free Mahmoud," said a young Dana worker. "This is so messed up. I'm not surprised. Trump will do anything. We need to impeach him and everyone in the Oval Office. Every UAW member should go on strike to protest this. This is just downright cruel."

Another young worker denounced Trump as a "dictator," and said, "I hate what he is doing. Everybody is equal. We're all human beings. We should all get treated fairly. Everybody has free speech, that's part of the Constitution. When [Trump] says something, it's cool, but when we say something, they want to deport you."

Asked if all UAW members should strike to demand his freedom, she said, "Everybody has to be on board for that. But not everyone is aware of what is going on. If people were aware then, of course, we should be on strike."

Several workers told WSWs reporters that the seizure and threatened deportation of Khalil had been an intense topic of discussion inside the factory during their lunch breaks.

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. This is going to be a rough four years. They are trying the same old thing, to divide and conquer us. Trump is going to steal Greenland and all these different countries. So, this is the imperialist thing. At the same

time, Musk is doing what he is doing while he makes \$8 million a day off the US government.

“I don’t know, maybe these things will unite us. Everyone, including those people who voted for Trump are going to feel pain. You know, if you put pain out here in the streets and people are going to start opening their eyes. We need another revolution. That’s my take on it.”

A veteran worker said, “This is very wrong, and Trump knows it. That’s what this country was built on, freedom of speech. They could do this to anybody. They’re taking away programs and then they’re hiring unqualified people who aren’t fit to pump gas, but they are Trump loyalists.”

Another young worker said Mahmoud had gone “through the certain policies and requirements so he can live here and be a legal person, and they’re still trying to deport him. He has a green card and is married to an American, you can’t just take away his rights, especially for standing up for his people. He has the right to speak up.

“It’s just like they are trying to take away the citizenship of Mexicans and other immigrants who are born here. If you are born on US soil, you are considered a citizen. You can’t take away our rights. We’re just like everybody else, no matter if we are just nine to five and go home to our family after work. Because if we call off and do the strike stuff, I don’t know how they are going to get their parts out. So, everybody should be treated the same, man.”

Forced by the broad opposition to this kidnapping of Khalil among rank-and-file members, including 100,000 higher education workers, UAW President Shawn Fain issued a perfunctory statement earlier in the week, declaring, “As we stated under the previous Presidential administration, ‘The UAW will never support the mass arrest or intimidation of those exercising their right to protest, strike, or speak out against injustice.’”

The UAW president did not even cite Khalil by name, let alone call for any collective action to fight Trump’s dictatorial effort to disappear a union member.

On Thursday night, the UAW bureaucracy posted an announcement on X that Columbia University had fired the president of the grad student union one day before contract negotiations, “in a further crackdown on free speech.” Another post added, “If they can come for graduate workers, if they can arrest, deport, expel, or imprison union leaders and activists for their protected political speech, then they can come for you. For your contract. For your paycheck. For your family. And for

your rights.”

Coming from the UAW bureaucracy these statements are utterly hypocritical. Fain was the staunchest supporter of Biden and Harris even as they gave their financial, military and political support to the Israeli regime’s genocidal assault on the Palestinians and joined with Republicans to slander campus protests as “antisemitic.” Since Trump’s election, Fain has fully embraced the fascist president’s tariff policies, presenting the efforts to divide American workers from their brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada and other countries as pro-working class.

Like the Democratic Party, the UAW bureaucracy is opposed to any genuine fight against Trump’s dictatorial policies because they fear that such a movement would quickly develop into a confrontation with the capitalist system and the corporate-oligarchy, which they serve.

As the response of autoworkers demonstrates, there is deep identification with the revolutionary democratic traditions of the US and basic democratic rights in the working class. The fight to demand Khalil’s freedom and to oppose fascism and dictatorship requires building rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace, free from the control of the union sellouts, to mobilize workers in mass demonstrations and collective action, including nationwide strike action.

Join the upcoming online meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (US), “Free Mahmoud Khalil! Mobilize the working class against Trump’s dictatorship! Defend the right to public education!” on Saturday, March 15, at 12:00 p.m. EDT. Register here. To join the fight for rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact