

Speech to London meeting

The political issues behind the persecution of Momodou Taal and the assault on democratic rights in the US

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Joseph Kishore, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), delivered the following speech at a public meeting in London hosted by the SEP (UK) on Saturday May 31, “Trump’s war on free speech: The case of Momodou Taal”.

A British-Gambian citizen who was studying at Cornell University, Taal was forced to leave the United States in March to escape arrest and detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents following his lawsuit challenging the legality of US President Donald Trump’s decrees banning campus protests against the Gaza genocide.

The report has been edited slightly for publication. An initial report of the meeting was published by the World Socialist Web Site on June 1, 2025.

This meeting is centered on the case of Momodou Taal, a target of political repression by the Trump administration. You have heard from Momodou himself and from his attorney, Eric Lee, about the extraordinary and unlawful efforts to seize and deport him for the “crime” of challenging the president’s executive orders in court.

I would like to review the broader political situation within which this case is unfolding.

The Trump administration is systematically and deliberately moving to establish a presidential dictatorship in the United States. It has been doing so from its first day back in office, indeed far before that.

The executive orders adopted from day one, which are the basis of the seizure of Momodou Taal and the lawsuit that was filed, have been followed by the invocation of the Alien Enemies Act, the mass deportations to El Salvador, the threats against the judiciary, the open defiance of judicial rulings, even the arrest of judges, the targeting of students and immigrants, the systematic assault on free speech. This is a government that is working based on a plan to overturn the Constitution of the United States.

Over the past several weeks, the attention of the administration has turned to the escalating offensive against Harvard University. Harvard is not a radical institution. It is deeply embedded in the political, military, and intelligence apparatus of the American state. But it has now become a target of the administration because of what it represents: a global institution of science, culture, and education, with one of the largest populations of international students in the country.

The administration has moved to strip Harvard of its ability to sponsor international students—some 6,800 individuals from over 100 countries. If the courts end up siding with Trump, these students face deportation, not for breaking any law, but because Harvard is being punished for refusing to cede its curriculum, its governance and its ideological framework to direct state control. The university has also been ordered to hand over five

years of political surveillance data on students, including video footage of protests, disciplinary records, and any statements deemed “anti-American.”

The Nazis had a term—*Gleichschaltung*, “synchronization”—referring to the forcible coordination of all aspects of social and intellectual life with the aims of the state. Under Hitler, this included the purging of universities and the subordination of cultural institutions to fascist ideology. Trump is operating based on this playbook, as he and his coterie of advisors draw on the traditions of fascism in all their operations.

One of the latest developments occurred this past week when the Trump administration’s State Department, under Secretary of State Marco Rubio—who, by the way, was approved unanimously by every single Democrat, including Bernie Sanders—released a reorganization plan that includes the creation of the Office of Remigration, which explicitly draws its lexicon from the international far right. “Remigration” is a term associated with the neo-Nazi great replacement theory.

They talk about anti-Semitism in relation to the protests against the Gaza genocide. But the fascists argue that the Jewish people are seeking to bring in immigrants into the United States and other countries to displace the native white people, who [the immigrants] have to be “remigrated,” that is driven out of the country. They are, in fact, the promoters of anti-Semitism.

We could spend a great deal of time speaking about the dictatorial actions of the Trump administration, but I imagine that those of you here do not need convincing on this score. Rather, the question is what must be done, and this is closely related to another question which must be addressed first: From where did Trump arise?

Trump is not simply an individual. For such a figure to come to the head of the state of American imperialism, the center of world capitalism, it must reflect profound objective factors, and I would stress two.

The first is the extreme growth of social inequality. Trump—who emerged from the sewers of the New York and New Jersey real estate and casino industries—personifies the criminality of American capitalism, the distilled essence of financial parasitism.

With the instincts of a huckster and con man, Trump has leveraged the presidency into a mechanism for personal enrichment on an unprecedented scale. It has, in fact, become a tradition now in the United States for presidents of the United States upon completing office to become multimillionaires. It really took off with Clinton, and then Obama really perfected the mechanisms. Trump, however, has taken this to a new level. He is auctioning off access based on how much money is poured into his family-owned memecoin, among other grifts. One estimate puts the increase in Trump’s fortunes from the family’s memecoins at \$2.9

billion alone.

In defending himself, Trump can perhaps justifiably argue that his methods of self-enrichment, while perhaps more overt, are not outside the norms of the financial oligarchy as a whole. He is *their man*.

Over the past three decades, the S&P 500 has risen by over 850 percent, generating enormous wealth not through productive investment, but through speculation and asset inflation. But this explosion of wealth has not gone to society as a whole. By 2025, the top 1 percent controlled 93 percent of all U.S. stock wealth, while the bottom 50 percent owned just 0.3 percent.

Every crisis—the crash of 2008, the pandemic, the ongoing wars—has been treated by this class as a windfall. Between 2019 and 2021 alone, the richest one percent captured \$26 trillion, or 63 percent of all new global wealth. In 2024 alone, the final year of the Biden administration, the nineteen richest American households gained an additional \$1 trillion in wealth.

And again, they have utilized every crisis. The pandemic, which killed tens of millions throughout the world, over a million in the United States itself, was used as an opportunity for a massive handout of wealth to the rich. They opened up the presses for the financial oligarchy. And as a result, figures like Elon Musk, the guiding force behind the Trump administration, increased their own personal wealth enormously.

The Trump administration is a government of the financial oligarchy. And democratic rights are incompatible with such extreme levels of wealth concentration.

The second major factor driving the turn to dictatorship is the eruption of imperialist violence, with the United States in the cockpit. For more than three decades, the American ruling class has waged an unending series of wars across the globe. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the promise of a “peace dividend” has given way to a relentless campaign of militarism: Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen.

Torture became official state policy, exemplified in the horrific images that emerged in the initial years of the Iraq war of the torture at Abu Ghraib. The United States established a global network of CIA black sites, drone assassination programs, particularly under Obama, and concentration camps like Guantanamo Bay.

The Biden administration was focused above all on the escalation of war, focused on two fronts: the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which has brought the world to the brink of nuclear conflict, and the genocide in Gaza.

It is not necessary to argue here that what is happening in Gaza is a crime of historic proportions. But it is worth emphasizing this: an essential framework for the massive assault on democratic rights within the United States—including the case of Momodou Taal—is *opposition to a genocide*. The central justification for political repression is that people are protesting the mass slaughter of a civilian population.

The Israeli state has openly declared its aim: to kill or displace the entire population of Gaza. Virtually every hospital, school, university, apartment complex—every structure needed for life—has been bombed. Gaza has been turned into rubble.

And yet it is not only happening—it is being defended. It is being normalized. Those who oppose it, including large numbers of Jewish youth, are slandered as antisemites. The word “antisemitism” is being twisted to mean its opposite: support for genocide is the new test of moral legitimacy.

There is a long and bloody relationship between war abroad and repression at home. Every major war of the past century has been accompanied by a crackdown on dissent, a silencing of opposition, and a shredding of democratic rights. Something new is now taking place, however. The language of “enemy combatants,” the justification of “emergency powers,” the criminalization of political dissent—these are no longer reserved for foreign battlefields. They have become the structure of

domestic rule, of Trump’s dictatorship.

We now come to the critical political questions, and here it is necessary to speak plainly. The basic problem we confront is not an absence of opposition. The problem is a lack of political clarity. The situation demands that political issues be posed directly and answered honestly. Conclusions must be drawn from the experiences through which we have passed—and the experiences through which we are now passing.

I have already spoken of the objective roots of Trump’s rise. But objective processes always find expression in politics. *Political responsibility* for Trump’s emergence, for the fact that he is again in the White House, must be placed squarely on the shoulders of the Democratic Party—including, and I would say especially, its so-called “left” wing: figures like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Let us recall the course of recent history. During Trump’s first term, he worked systematically to build the foundations of a dictatorship. In 2020, during the mass uprising against the police murder of George Floyd—one of the largest protest movements in American history, which reverberated across the globe—Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act and mobilize the military against the population. Then came January 6, 2021, when he incited a fascist mob to storm the Capitol in an ultimately failed coup attempt to overturn the election and remain in power.

And what was the response? Four years of the Biden administration, defined above all by war. The war in Ukraine was presented as an “unprovoked” conflict, a struggle between democracy and autocracy. But this is a lie. It is a war instigated by American imperialism, armed and financed by the same forces that support and enable the genocide in Gaza. Its aims are the same: geopolitical domination, access to markets and resources, and the elimination of any obstacles to U.S. global supremacy. Those who oppose the war, including Ukrainian socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk—imprisoned by the Zelensky regime—are silenced and persecuted. And it was, of course, under Biden that the genocide in Gaza began, along with the suppression of protests and the lie of “antisemitism.”

I think it’s important to emphasize in relation to Momodou that, yes, he’s been persecuted by Trump, but the lie that was used as the basis for this persecution was developed by the Biden administration and by Cornell University and its administration, which handed Trump the framework within which it could carry out this persecution. That was the Biden administration. It armed and financed this genocide and initiated the persecution of opponents.

It is impossible to understand how Trump, this billionaire huckster and criminal, could present himself as an opponent of the political establishment—even, absurdly, as an opponent of war—without understanding the role of the Democratic Party. It is a party of Wall Street, the military, and the intelligence agencies. It could offer nothing to the broad mass of the working class. It was and is opposed to any appeal to the interests of the working class.

Having said A, one must also say B. Not only the Democratic Party, but those who enable the Democratic Party. Figures like Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez. Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, attacked critics of Biden from the left for engaging in a “privileged critique.” Sanders declared Biden to be “the most progressive president since FDR.” Both insist that opposition to fascism and oligarchy must be developed through the Democratic Party—the very party that paved the way for Trump’s return.

Where are they in the face of this escalating attack on democratic rights? They’re saying nothing. Sanders recently made a statement in which he was asked whether there were any policies of the Trump administration he agreed with. He responded, yes—the sealing of the borders is good, and we have to deal with the immigration problem. In other words, it is precisely on the attack on immigrants that he signals his alignment.

I reference Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez not because of them as individuals so much as representatives of tendencies. Changing what

needs to be changed, such figures exist in every country. You have your own here in the UK, going by the name of Jeremy Corbyn, whose project of transforming the Labour Party has given birth to Sir Keir Starmer, who is presently doing his best to cozy up to the fascist right and adopt the policy of Nigel Farage. In other countries they are organized in separate parties—the Left Party in Germany, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Melenchon's *La France Insoumise*, etc.

When in opposition, they mouth left phrases, and they claim that change will come through forms of the existing political social system. If they achieve power, and occasionally they do, they implement the right-wing measures demanded by the banks, fueling anger and frustration and handing the far right the ability to posture as opposition to the status quo.

Returning to Trump: On the *World Socialist Web Site*, we have explained that the Trump administration represents, in objective terms, a violent realignment of the character of the state to correspond to the oligarchic structure of American society. The old forms of bourgeois democracy—already hollowed out by decades of war, inequality, and repression—are being cast aside. Alongside this transformation of the state is a political realignment of the ruling class as a whole—a normalization of fascism and barbarism. With Trump, the American bourgeoisie is plumbing the depths of cultural degradation.

Yet a revolutionary perspective within this situation requires a clear and concrete assessment of the relationship of class forces. As David North, the chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, stated at this year's International May Day Online Rally: "Trump, in his intentions and personality, is a fascist. But he does not yet command, as Hitler did, a mass fascist movement. History teaches that the development and victory of such a mass reactionary movement depends upon the demoralization of the working class. But that is not the situation that prevails today."

There are not in the United States today armies of storm troopers roaming the streets. Trump's policies are deeply unpopular, and polls indicate they are increasingly unpopular. Over the past five years, the political trajectory of the ruling class is defined by an acceleration towards reaction, war, and dictatorship. But this is not the only process unfolding. At the same time, a powerful countercurrent has emerged in the form of the growing social and political radicalization of the international working class.

In every country, workers are being driven into struggle over the past four years by soaring inflation, deteriorating living conditions, austerity, and decades of social inequality. From mass strikes in France, Germany, and the UK, to general strikes in Greece, Argentina, and Nigeria, to the eruption of protests and walkouts by auto workers, healthcare workers, and educators in the United States—these are the early expressions of a global resurgence of class struggle.

A number of political points, political principles, arise from this situation. First, the problems we confront are international in character. The assault on democratic rights is global in character. You have here in the UK your own effort to brand opposition to genocide as anti-Semitic, your own victims of police frame-ups and repression. In Germany, the ruling class has concluded that it must respond to its own crimes of the past, its own responsibility for the greatest crime of the 20th century, the Holocaust, by reviving its previous traditions and backing the current genocide in Gaza. It is elevating the far-right AfD to the centers of power. These are international questions, and they must be fought as international questions.

Second, the defense of democratic rights is fundamentally a class question. It's a question of the mobilization of the working class as a class. The Socialist Equality Party has taken up the defense of Taal and many others, not just because he himself is a courageous figure and we agree on many things. As Momodou said, it is a dress rehearsal. The attack on democratic rights will be directed against all opposition to the policies of the financial and corporate aristocracy.

Just as the attack on democratic rights is directed at the working class, so the defense of democratic rights must be rooted in the working class. The working class must be mobilized to defend the rights of students and to oppose the drive to dictatorship. And there is powerful basis for this. There's not broad support among workers in the United States or in any country for the establishment of a dictatorship. The working class internationally is an enormously powerful social force, and the ruling class is going to confront that.

In the introduction to this meeting, Chris spoke of the "big lie," referencing the statement from David North published on the WSWS. One can say in a sense the weaker the ruling class, the bigger the lies it resorts to. The lie is an expression of the fact that the interests of the ruling class are in fundamental conflict with reality, with the sentiments and interests of the broad mass of the population.

But they'll get their response, and they'll get their response from the working class. And one already sees the lies collapsing. They think that they can just lie to the population, that they can suppress opposition forever. Well, they've got another thing coming. As Gerry Healy, the leader of British Trotskyism for many years, said when he was at his best: Big task for little men. The ruling class is confronting and will confront an enormous social force, which is the working class. And that is the perspective which we are fighting for and which we urge everyone to adopt.

It's not a question of appealing to one or another faction within the state, but turning to the working class, in the United States and internationally, on the basis of a fight against the oligarchy, against imperialism, and against the social and economic system that underlies it: capitalism. There is no other road forward. And it's not a question of speculating whether socialism is necessary, whether the working class will fight.

In confronting the reality of the present situation, the reality of the genocide in Gaza, the reality of escalating imperialist war, the reality of the growth of fascism and dictatorship, we must conclude that it is both possible and necessary that the development of a revolutionary movement is the task. So, it's not a question of speculating whether it is necessary but of taking up that fight, in the United States and throughout the world.



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