

Momodou Taal and his lawyers address law students at Wayne State on Trump attacks on democratic rights

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The Wayne State University Law School in Detroit sponsored a meeting on Friday, October 24, on “Executive Orders and Constraints on Free Speech,” which dealt with the legal and political issues arising from the Trump administration’s persecution of Cornell University graduate student Momodou Taal.

The panel including Taal, who participated remotely, and two fellow litigants from Cornell University who were co-plaintiffs in the case of *Momodou Taal v. Donald Trump*, and the two lawyers who filed the lawsuit, Eric Lee and Chris Godshall-Bennett.

Taal is a British-Gambian citizen who was studying at Cornell University. He participated in student protests in 2024 against the Gaza genocide, as well as speaking at a protest against arms manufacturers who were part of a recruitment event on the campus.

For the latter “crime,” Taal was targeted by the university administration for deportation from the United States. Cornell’s provost suspended Taal, and told him he had 48 hours to leave the country because his student visa was no longer valid.

After a vigorous response by Taal and his legal team, the university backed down and restored his status as an enrolled student. But the effort to remove him was revived after Donald Trump entered the White House and ordered full-scale persecution of all foreign students who had engaged in protests against the foreign policy of American imperialism.

Taal was forced to leave the US in March to escape detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, after his lawyers filed suit challenging Trump’s executive orders attacking campus protests against the Gaza genocide.

One of the executive orders allows the removal of

foreign students for criticizing Israel, or makes them inadmissible if they’re a student or individual attempting to apply for a visa from outside the United States. The second executive order renders individuals potentially deportable or excludable if they so much as criticize the US government, its institutions, or American culture.

Several supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the meeting. Steve, a former chemist, explained the reason he was there. “I read the web site and get an update of what’s happening and a general orientation. I want to hear what points will be made about the law.”

John Gruda, another attendee, said: “When I heard about the topic of free speech I was intrigued. It’s a polarized time and I want to hear what they say. I was a graduate of Wayne State in sociology.”

Taal joined the meeting via video. He explained what he termed the “Palestine Exception,” to the right of free speech, meaning that the US government seeks to suppress political speech which is critical of the state of Israel and defends the Palestinian people.

“It is a term given to a described legal carve-out of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and free speech laws in Canada and Europe that allows government establishments and other institutions to suppress pro-Palestine protests,” he said.

Sriram Parasurama, who was a graduate student at Cornell, noted that the “Palestine exception” is not a Trump phenomenon, but a longstanding issue in the United States, under administrations of both parties. He was asked to join as a co-plaintiff in the Taal lawsuit against Trump’s executive order in his capacity as a US citizen who was deprived of the right to hear

Momodou Taal.

M?koma wa Ng?g?, a professor at Cornell, is also a co-plaintiff. He talked about growing up under a dictatorship in Kenya, then coming to the United States when his father emigrated because of the repression. He was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison at the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and described how he saw “Muslim students taken out of classrooms, with the professors proceeding as though nothing had happened. Now I’m a professor seeing students taken out of class. I can’t do nothing. It’s a question of conscience and international solidarity.”

Eric Lee, an attorney defending the rights of Taal, explained that freedom of speech is guaranteed under the Bill of Rights not just to American citizens, but to everyone living in this country. The word “citizen” does not appear in the text of the First Amendment, which refers to the rights of the people, he said.

“The First Amendment is a switch, not a dial. It’s either on or off,” Lee said. “Because Momodou is not here, that violates all our rights here at this meeting, because we can’t have face-to-face contact, which is vital. American citizens will face this too.”

About going to the courts, Lee said, “We do everything we can through them. But also, we can expose the framework of whatever remains of this supposed democracy. People in this country, despite the Trump vote, understand the power of the Bill of Rights and Constitution. This gives us the support politically to win working people here, and all over the world.”

Chris Godshall-Bennett, an attorney who is co-counsel with Eric Lee, was initially an attorney for an Arab-American group. He explained that he is Jewish and started the Jewish Voice for Peace at Columbia 11 years ago.

Godshall-Bennett addressed law students at WSU directly, saying, “It’s an all-hands-on-deck moment. Law students have to think about what their next few years are going to be like.” He attacked the fake charges of antisemitism against those protesting against the Israeli genocide in Gaza, “which is the reaction of the Zionists to the loss of popular opinion on the issue of Palestine, particularly among young people. There has to be one crime that shakes us.”

A lively discussion followed the initial presentations, with law students raising questions about the language

of the First Amendment and the various legal hurdles Momodou Taal and his lawyers had to encounter, as well as the chilling effect of the Trump administration repression on the campuses.

In the course of this discussion, Lee placed the attack on Momodou Taal within the framework of the bipartisan attack on democratic rights, which has reached the point that Trump is seeking to establish a presidential dictatorship. The Democrats act as his collaborators and facilitators, opposing any mass mobilization of working people against this growing danger.

An SEP member in the audience commented that while the repression of student protests on many campuses had certainly had an effect, the American people, and the working class in particular, were not paralyzed with fear. The predominant mood, as shown in the massive “No Kings” protests on October 18, was not fear. It was one of anger and determination to fight back against the Trump administration and its attacks on democratic rights.



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