

Cornell president launches attack on student facing deportation for opposing Gaza genocide

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On Monday, the president of Cornell University issued a statement defending the suspension of international graduate student and instructor Momodou Taal for his participation in a peaceful protest of more than 100 students on campus on September 18.

In an email sent to the student body and faculty, Cornell President Michael Kotlikoff made it clear that the aim of the suspension of Taal is to crack down on outspoken political opposition on campus to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

President Kotlikoff stated that there is an “ongoing process to identify and sanction participants” in the September 18 protest which shut down a career fair on campus that included military contractors, such as Boeing and L3Harris, that are profiting from the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and now also the military invasion of Lebanon.

The Cornell president said that videos and photographs from the event “have been used to identify nearly 20 individuals who participated in this disruption,” and, “All who have been identified as Cornell students are being referred for conduct violations.”

The president went on to make the cynical claim that “No one has been singled out,” when it is obvious that Taal, who faces an end to his academic career at Cornell and deportation, has been targeted by the university to intimidate students and faculty from exercising their free speech rights on campus.

Meanwhile, although he does not specifically name Momodou Taal, the purpose of President Kotlikoff’s statement is to reject the demands by students, student organizations, faculty and the public for the university to rescind the suspension of the British-Gambian student.

The president’s statement repeats false claims made previously by university officials that the protest in opposition to war profiteers at the career fair was “not a peaceful or harmless rally” and that the demonstrators had created an “environment of intimidation and fear.” These

claims have been disputed by eyewitnesses and an on-the-spot report by the *Cornell Daily Sun*.

Eric Lee, attorney for Taal, posted a response to President Kotlikoff’s statement on Twitter/X which said,

The proper forum for adjudicating the allegations against Mr. Taal is in a formal hearing and investigative process, not public pronouncements from the president. Now more than ever, Mr. Taal must be afforded the due process right to challenge the factual and legal basis of the suspension. President Kotlikoff’s personal intervention in Mr. Taal’s case raises serious concerns about the administration’s ability to conduct a fair and unbiased review of the appeal presently pending before the provost. The administration’s rush to judgment also violates the rights of Mr. Taal’s academic worker-colleagues to due process before disenrollment.

President Kotlikoff’s letter concludes by claiming in Orwellian manner that the administration is revoking a foreign student’s visa without due process in order “to safeguard the rights of everyone in our community.” In actual fact, a powerful and well-connected Ivy League administration is forcing one of its own students off campus and out of the country because it disagrees with his defense of the Palestinian people. It is urgent that the campus and the broader population come to Mr. Taal’s defense to prevent Cornell from setting this dangerous precedent.

Taal appealed his suspension on Wednesday to the vice president of student and campus life, Ryan Lombardi, who rejected the request in less than 24 hours. He has one more

appeal pending before Provost Kavita Bala for which he has yet to receive a response. If the suspension is upheld, Taal faces the loss of his F-1 visa status and imminent deportation from the US.

The movement among students and faculty to demand the rescinding of Taal's suspension is continuing to expand with rallies, phone calling and social media being coordinated to build support for the campaign.

The Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) issued an open letter on Monday addressed to the top Cornell University administrators expressing their "extreme concern about your decision to temporarily suspend Cornell graduate student Momodou Taal, without proper due process, on the grounds of his alleged disruptive participation in a pro-Palestine campus protest."

The open letter, which is signed by MESA President and Yale Law School professor Aslı Ü. Bâli and CAF Chair and University of Southern California professor emerita Laurie Brand, calls for the immediate rescinding of Taal's suspension and urges "Cornell University to refrain from arbitrary and draconian disciplinary measures against students, faculty and staff exercising their right to freedom of speech and assembly, and their academic freedom, including by expressing their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The *Sun* reported on Monday that more than 30 campus organizations have signed on to a campaign launched by the Coalition for Mutual Liberation to call the Cornell University administration to demand the rescinding of Taal's suspension. Among the organizations that have endorsed the campaign are Native American Indigenous Students at Cornell, South Asian Council and Fanclub Collective.

The Cornell Graduate Students United (CGSU) held a press conference on Friday and raised the demand that the University must bargain over Taal's suspension according to a memorandum of agreement the union had reached with the University in July. A report in the *Sun* said, "the agreement gives the union the right to bargain over the effects of academic discipline of graduate students as long as that discipline affects their working conditions."

On Friday, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality issued a statement denouncing the Cornell University administration and calling for the mobilization of the working class to defend Momodou Taal.

The statement placed the attack on the graduate student within the context of the broader context of the attack on democratic rights and escalating global war. The statement said,

The escalating assault on democratic rights on campuses is motivated by a fear within the ruling class that opposition to the war will be connected to the growing struggles of workers in the United States and internationally. The measures being taken against students will be used to suppress and criminalize all opposition to the policies of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

The victimization of Taal for protesting Cornell's ties to military contractors, including Boeing, takes place amidst an ongoing strike by 33,000 Boeing workers. The strike followed a vote by more than 94 percent to reject a contract backed by the IAM union apparatus, revealing the enormous opposition in the working class to the escalating assault on jobs and wages.

Five hundred workers at another military contractor, Eaton, in Michigan, are on strike after rejecting two contracts backed by the UAW. And this coming week, a contract for 45,000 dockworkers across the US East Coast expires and a strike would pose a serious threat to the global operations of American imperialism.

The IYSSE calls on all students at Cornell and at campuses throughout the country to oppose the attack on Taal. We demand his immediate reinstatement and an end to all threats to revoke his visa. We call for the dropping of all charges against pro-Palestinian protesters across the country and an end to the criminalization of free speech.

The defense of democratic rights and opposition to war, however, can only be successful through the mobilization of that social force that has the power to oppose the capitalist ruling elite—the working class—in the US and throughout the world.



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