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Burlington City Council Votes Unanimously to Adopt Free-Speech Resolution

Late last night the Burlington City Council unanimously adopted a Free-Speech Resolution that specifically supports the ICE-arrested students:

<https://burlingtonvt.portal.civicclerk.com/event/7137/files/attachment/8816>

The 6-page resolution is entitled, “Support of the First Amendment’s Rights of Free Speech, Association, a Free Press, Free Association, and Dissent, and the Defense and Support of Mohsen Mahdawi, Rumeysa Ozturk, and Mahmoud Khalil.”

It was introduced by Progressive City Councilor, Gene Bergman, who commented on the vote, “This was a meaningful, not symbolic act. As Mohsen said in today’s NPR interview, the solidarity of the people in Vermont lifts his spirits and facilitates his work for peace. The resolution commits our city government to act in ways that will help protect the fundamental freedoms for everyone, freedoms that are under attack as the deportation of US citizens show. It sends messages to other governments and organizations, including universities and colleges, encouraging them to stand up and resist what is clearly a frontal attack on the very fabric of our democracy by the Trump administration. And it is one more step in the rising of millions of people across the country saying ‘Enough’ and ‘Stop’. I am grateful to the Democratic caucus who joined with Progressives so that we could give this message with a strong and united voice. Together we will win.”

Gene can be reached at 802-598-3602 or gbergman@burlingtonvt.gov.

Paul Fleckenstein, who helped draft the resolution, said, “we are thrilled that all members of the council voted for this resolution. We hope councils and select boards in other Vermont towns will use it as a starting point for free-speech resolutions of their own.” Paul is a member of the Vermont Coalition for Palestinian Liberation.

The resolution recognizes “a constitutional crisis where the Trump administration

is acting to shatter democratic norms.” It states, “the leading edge of authoritarianism is the assault on free speech. . . So far, this assault by the Trump Administration [on] free speech has been focused especially on legal immigrants who have been exercising their free speech rights on Palestine. . . Trump’s first line of attack must be our first line of united defense.”

The resolution quotes from US Supreme Court cases affirming that every resident of the United States has the exact same first amendment rights, whether they are citizens or aliens.

It notes how the Trump Administration used federal agents to arrest, imprison and attempt to deport students who have exercised their first amendment rights to speak out or protest for Palestinian human rights.

The cases of two of the students, Rumeysa Ozturk and Mohsen Mahdawi, are currently before the Federal District Court in Vermont. Mohsen, now held in a Vermont jail, will be in court in Burlington for a hearing on Wednesday. Last week the court ordered that Rumeysa be brought back to Vermont from her confinement in Louisiana for a hearing in Burlington on May 3.

The Resolution quotes from a letter dictated by Mahmoud Khalil on the phone on March 18 from Immigrations and Customs (ICE) detention in Louisiana, in which he said, “My arrest was a direct consequence of exercising my right to free speech as I advocated for a free Palestine and an end to the genocide in Gaza.”

In the resolution, “the City Council reaffirms its commitment to the core values of the United States Constitution, particularly the protection of the right of all citizens and non-citizens residing in the country to freedom of speech, to peaceably assemble, and the right to petition for redress of grievances, as well as the right to due process of law.”

The City Council further “calls for the immediate release of Mohsen Mahdawi, Rumeysa Ozturk, Mahmoud Khalil,” and “opposes any government actions or policies that seek to suppress or punish individuals for expressing their views on public issues.”

It further calls “on college and university administrations to stand up to the

threats and coercion, and to refuse any cooperation with federal immigration and law enforcement authorities seeking to unlawfully persecute foreign students and faculty and student dissenters."