

WikiLeaks Party mired in crisis

Patrick O'Connor
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A major crisis has erupted in the WikiLeaks Party (WLP), established just a few months ago by journalist and whistleblowing activist Julian Assange. In the past week, four of the eleven members of the party's governing National Council have resigned, together with numerous activists and Leslie Cannold, the party's second Senate candidate in Victoria. Had Assange, the party's first Victorian candidate, won a place in the Senate but been unable to leave the Ecuadorian embassy in London, Cannold would have taken his place.

The turmoil within the WLP provides a salutary lesson in class politics.

In May, the Socialist Equality Party explained that our long standing support for Assange's exposure of the crimes of US imperialism through WikiLeaks, and our opposition to the efforts of Washington and its allies to railroad him into jail in either the US or Sweden, did not obligate us to support his party or his Senate campaign. (See: "Why the SEP does not endorse the WikiLeaks Party")

In our comment, the SEP declared: "Principled socialist politics is not based on personalities but on the interests of the working class. We evaluate parties and the candidates who represent them on the basis of their political history, program and class orientation. Proceeding from these criteria, political support cannot be extended by the SEP to the WikiLeaks Party, which has been formed around Julian Assange's person. To the extent that the WLP has attempted to formulate its programmatic demands, it remains within the framework of bourgeois-reformist parliamentary politics...

"Assange's politics are an eclectic combination of libertarianism and reformism. However sincere his intentions, Assange's political associations have been all over the map and reveal a man whose decisions are influenced by impressionism, naiveté and short-sighted opportunism.... As for the structure of the WLP, office holders and members of the new party include a wildly heterogeneous political mixture of disaffected Liberals, and libertarians and various currents of middle-class protest politics."

This disparate formation has now blown apart, on the eve

of the September 7 election.

The immediate trigger was the publication of the party's Senate preferences. Under Australia's anti-democratic electoral system, designed to prop up the capitalist two-party system, voters must rank all the parties on the ballot paper in their order of preference. In the Senate, however, voters have the option of just marking "1" for the party of their choice, with that party nominating where its preferences will be directed. Many smaller parties seek to exploit the system and reach the 14 percent vote required to win a Senate position via sordid "preference deals" with each other and with the major parties—Labor, Liberal-National and Greens, which horse-trade between themselves, seeking to block potential rivals and fortify their own positions.

The WLP in New South Wales (NSW) entered into precisely such preference negotiations with various Christian fundamentalist, right-wing parties, along with others such as the Sex Party, a front group for the pornography industry. The WLP finally preferenced these parties, and the fascistic Australia First party, ahead of others, including the Greens. In Western Australia (WA), the WLP's preferences were directed to the conservative, rural-based National Party. These decisions provoked a furore from those elements within and around the WLP who hail from the same milieu as the Greens.

For this affluent, middle-class layer, failing to direct preferences to the Greens, a bourgeois party that kept the right-wing minority Labor government in office for three years, was tantamount to political treason. Several of those who have quit the party have called on voters in WA and NSW to choose the Greens over the WLP.

Others within the WLP regarded the preference manoeuvres as an enormous tactical blunder that could prevent Assange and other candidates, including themselves, from getting into parliament.

One of the National Council members who resigned, Dan Mathews, a longstanding friend and colleague of Assange, issued a public statement explaining that he had argued against doing preference deals with other parties. "We did not project a particularly ideological image and so would not immediately alienate left or right," he stated. "We could

plausibly expect relatively high preferences across the spectrum—especially from the Greens, left and libertarian minor parties, and perhaps even other parties too. If we played our cards right we could perhaps pull off an historic result like the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* [the Five Star protest party] in Italy.”

In other words, Matthews was just as fixated on winning seats as the rest of the National Council. He believed, however, that the best tactic for maintaining the party’s credentials, as somewhat anti-establishment, among significant sections of the population, especially young people, was to keep a discrete distance from the other parties. His reference to the Italian national election in February 2013 is instructive. The Five Star party headed by the wealthy, high profile Italian comedian Beppe Grillo won 25 percent of the vote by denouncing the corruption of the main bourgeois parties, “left” and right wing, while obscuring its own policies. In the wake of the vote, Grillo’s political agenda has become very evident in his promotion of austerity spending cuts and pro-business restructuring measures.

Matthews’ approach was rejected by Assange, as well as John Shipton, Assange’s father and WLP secretary, and the party’s campaign manager Greg Barns, a former adviser to the conservative Howard government. As Matthews explained: “They thought it [preferencing] was the only way to win, and they were prepared to do deals with those parties.”

The tactical dispute over preferencing took place alongside an increasingly open appeal by Assange to elements within Australian ruling circles. He has promoted the WLP as a revived version of the Australian Democrats, a self-styled small ‘l’ liberal party in the Senate that was wiped out after it voted for the former Howard government’s regressive goods and services tax (GST) in 1999.

The WLP has failed to produce a political manifesto or program. Instead, Assange has outlined a revised version of the Democrats’ pledge “to keep the bastards honest”, promising to be a party of review to ensure policy is not based on “inaccurate, poorly disclosed or inadequate information.” Such a stance simply means acceptance of the big business policies of the establishment parties. This is the real political content of Assange’s claim that his party is neither right- nor left-wing.

Where the WLP *has* staked out positions, they are unsurprisingly in line with those of the major parties.

On refugees, for example, Assange has defended the so-called “offshore processing” of asylum seekers, i.e., deporting them to impoverished Pacific countries and imprisoning them there while their claim for refugee status is assessed, in flagrant breach of international law and their

democratic rights. On the threatened US-led military assault on Syria, the party issued a statement last Sunday that did not oppose Australian participation in this criminal imperialist war. Rather, it simply insisted on “transparency and accountability”—that the war be “ratified” by the prime minister and parliament, that better evidence be produced than that used “to mislead Australia into the Iraq War” and that a guarantee be made that any military intervention serves “Australian interests.” In other words, the WLP will line up behind further illegal US military aggression to the extent that it advances the predatory interests of Australian imperialism.

Those who have been attracted to the WikiLeaks Party, particularly students and youth, by WikiLeaks’ exposure of US war crimes and diplomatic intrigues should draw the necessary political lessons.

Leon Trotsky once explained that the significance of a political party lies in its program. In that sense, the WLP, which has no clear programmatic basis, is not a political party at all. Rather it is an electoral apparatus built around the personality of Julian Assange that has drawn together various disparate elements whose overriding preoccupation has been to secure the privileges that come from a parliamentary seat. Regardless of individual intentions, such organisations are inevitably torn apart, as the glaring inconsistencies in their foundations are laid bare by political events—in this case sooner rather than later.

The political strength of the SEP is its program of revolutionary socialism that represents the historic interests of the working class and is rooted in the key strategic experiences of the international working class over the past century. It provides the only viable basis for opposing imperialist war, defending democratic rights, and defeating the social counter-revolution being waged by finance capital and its political representatives.



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