

Julian Assange challenges anti-democratic “no platform” campaign

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange addressed a meeting at the University of Sheffield May 12, condemning a campaign to ban him from speaking at several universities across Britain.

The efforts to silence Assange are part of the “no platform” policy adopted by the National Union of Students (NUS), based on the theories of gender and identity politics.

Nearly 300 people, mostly students, turned out to the ticketed event at the Sheffield Students’ Union Foundry. The large audience points to the groundswell of support for Assange, who has exposed war crimes carried out by the US government and other major powers in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the conspiracies hatched by the State Department and the CIA in countries around the world.

Assange spoke via video link from the Ecuadorian embassy in London. The event was sponsored by the Festival of Debate (FoD), which overcame initial efforts by the student union executive to ban the event and a campaign by feminist organisations based on slanderous claims that Assange is a “rape denier.”

Prior to the May 12 event, Assange was asked by FoD organisers for his opinion on efforts at Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University to block him from speaking. “I think, spreading out of US universities from about five years ago, there is a new culture of censorship on campuses and it is spreading to the UK,” Assange told *Now Then* magazine. “The problem in this case for me and for numerous other people, is that there is very high demand from students, but censorship at the management level.”

According to Sheffield Students’ Union (SU) president Christy McMorrow, (a member of the Labour Party), the eight-member executive voted unanimously to deny Assange a platform based on a “zero tolerance” policy toward sexual assault and providing a supposedly “safe space” on campus. This decision was subsequently overturned after consultation with students.

An open letter issued by LaDIY (a feminist collective) denounced Sheffield SU’s decision to reverse the ban as “rape apologism”. Showing contempt for democratic legal

principles, including the presumption of innocence, the letter claimed, “[T]he FoD event implicitly contributes to the silencing of rape and sexual assault survivors.”

The rape allegations against Assange have formed a central component of the attack on WikiLeaks. Their bogus character is a matter of public record. They were revived by the Swedish state in September 2010, having been earlier dropped by a senior prosecutor as groundless, in order to provide a legal mechanism by which Assange could be extradited from Sweden to the United States, where a sealed US Grand Jury indictment has been prepared.

LaDIY dismisses the political origins and context of the rape allegations and turns reality on its head, portraying Assange as the oppressor: “We are angered that this is yet another public opportunity for Assange to evade accountability using his position of power.” This of a man who is the victim of one of the most concerted state witch-hunts in modern history!

Opening the Q&A event, the compere referred to WikiLeaks’ “belief” that if Assange were extradited to the US he would face criminal prosecution. Assange responded by explaining, “This aspect of the presentation galls me. Someone ‘believes’ something? But the question isn’t what one *believes*, but what one *knows* as a result of facts and evidence.”

This approach, he said, was used to cast doubt: “It is *a fact* that the largest investigation in history is now underway against myself and WikiLeaks. It is *a fact* that a grand jury has been empanelled in the United States. And it is *a fact* that documents have been produced making clear the lines of investigation and the allegations against me. It is not a matter of what one ‘*believes*’.”

Assange spoke about the far-reaching implications of censorship, describing “a disastrous ongoing shift about what you are now allowed to publish.”

He responded to claims by the Pentagon, recycled endlessly by media outlets, that WikiLeaks caused “collateral damage” by releasing unredacted classified documents. “When people say you need to be responsible in

your reporting of the documents, you should be deeply suspicious—responsible to whom? WikiLeaks is not responsible to the establishment.”

“What are we up against?” he asked the audience, pointing out that the Pentagon employs a staggering 29,000 public relations officers whose role it was to suppress the truth, promoting violence and illegal wars of aggression around the world: “They have blood on their hands.”

Asked about attempts to ban the meeting at Sheffield University, including the open letter from LaDIY, Assange replied, “One must really question the statements that preceded this meeting. The generous conclusion is that people don’t read. I’m sure to some degree that must be true. Women’s rights are important. But there is no excuse for not doing basic due diligence.”

He continued, “This is something that I’ve been wanting to say for a long time: It is not acceptable to persecute people who are themselves only known to the world because they are persecuted people—persecuted by the most powerful military superpower in the world.”

In the Q&A session that followed, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter said, “In Australia, Britain, the US and internationally there is overwhelming support for the stand you have taken to expose war crimes that have taken the lives of millions of people. This sentiment stands in stark contrast to the position taken by two of the largest pseudo-left groups in Britain—the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] and the Socialist Party [SP]—who have insisted that you face extradition to Sweden over bogus and politically manufactured rape allegations.

“What do you think of the role played by these organisations, including commentators such as Owen Jones in the *Guardian*, who have utilised gender politics in order to line up with the state witch-hunt against you and against WikiLeaks? Do you believe that these forces have played a role in blocking the opposition of workers and young people to your ongoing incarceration?”

Assange said he was unaware of the positions of the SWP and SP, but acknowledged that identity politics was being “grabbed onto” to suppress debate—describing this as an “especially UK phenomenon.” He pointed to a longstanding nexus between identity politics and imperialism, including the 19th century interventions by British imperialism into the Ottoman Empire that were justified on the pretext of protecting the rights of women.

The Sheffield meeting was a victory over efforts to silence Assange and close down debate on fundamental issues surrounding the escalation of militarism and war. It points to mounting opposition among students to the anti-democratic implications of the NUS no-platform policy.

Last November, a similar attempt to block Assange from

speaking at the Cambridge Union debating society was overturned. Its president Oliver Mosley (who worked for the Conservative under secretary of state for prisons, Crispin Blunt, in 2013), called a student referendum—the first in the Union’s 200-year history—to decide whether to ban the WikiLeaks founder. Its women’s officer promptly resigned and was supported by the student union women’s officer, Charlie Chorley, who said the invitation to Assange had “alienated women and minorities.” Students voted overwhelmingly to host Assange with 76.9 percent voting yes.

In 2012, the NUS banned George Galloway (then MP for Bradford West) for being a “rape denier” after he stated that the allegations against Assange “don’t constitute rape.”

The ban on Galloway was part of efforts to prevent any critical discussion of the way in which Sweden’s byzantine rape laws have been deployed for nakedly political objectives.

Numerous legal experts have challenged the veracity of the rape allegations against Assange. Should they also be banned from speaking at university campuses, or perhaps stripped of their teaching posts? The thrust of the NUS no-platform movement is to transform universities into institutions of state-sponsored propaganda and repression.

Melbourne barrister James D. Caitlin, who acted for Assange during proceedings in London in 2010, penned an impassioned article concluding that Swedish authorities were “making it up as they go along”. “Rape” he explained, “is a crime of violence, duress or deception,” yet none of these elements was present in the sexual relations of Assange with either Anna Ardin or Sofia Wilen. Both willingly slept with Assange and subsequently boasted of their conquests via SMS and social media.



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