

Australian meetings to call for Julian Assange's freedom

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) has called public meetings in major cities as part of an international campaign, spearheaded by the *World Socialist Web Site*, against Internet censorship and growing efforts by governments around the world to suppress and silence opposition and political dissent.

A central aspect of the meetings will be the fight for the freedom of Julian Assange, the editor of WikiLeaks. Assange has been subjected to relentless persecution since late 2010 by the governments of the United States, Britain and Australia. He has been the target of a vicious vendetta because WikiLeaks courageously published leaked information that exposed US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan—including video footage of US forces murdering journalists—as well as the diplomatic conspiracies carried out by the ruling elites against the democratic and social rights of the international working class.

After more than seven years of persecution, Assange's fate hangs in the balance. The Ecuadorian government, which in June 2012 provided him political asylum within its embassy in London, has been pressured by the US and British governments to cut off his ability to communicate with the outside world, and to even deny him personal visitors. Since March 29, the already terrible conditions of his near six-year confinement inside the small embassy have been made even more intolerable.

The silencing of Assange has two connected motives. First, the imperialist powers are determined to prevent him from exposing the suppressed truth behind their escalating political and military provocations against Russia, which threaten to trigger war between nuclear-armed powers.

Second, their aim is to break Assange so that he leaves the Ecuadorian embassy and falls into the clutches of the waiting US and British authorities and intelligence agencies. By publicly railroading him into prison or worse, the ruling classes want to intimidate the growing political opposition to war and police-state forms of rule.

The Australian political and media establishment bears major responsibility for the outrages perpetrated against

Julian Assange, and for his current predicament.

Assange is an Australian citizen who is ostensibly entitled to the full support of the Australian government against attacks on his rights by other countries. In November 2010, however, as the Obama administration sought his arrest on false charges of espionage, and he confronted public death threats and an arrest warrant over fabricated, politically motivated allegations of sexual assault in Sweden, the Greens-backed Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard threw him to the wolves.

Gillard denounced the journalistic exposures by WikiLeaks as “illegal.” Labor signalled that if Assange returned to Australia, the government would collaborate with Washington to extradite him to the US to face a sham trial. Assange was left with no choice but to remain in Britain and seek to fight the attempts to extradite him to Sweden. On June 19, 2012, as his legal avenues became exhausted, he sought refuge in Ecuador's London embassy.

In December 2010, it is instructive to recall, hundreds of prominent Australian journalists, editors, academics, artists, politicians and lawyers signed an “Open Letter” to Gillard, calling on her to “condemn” the threats against Assange and to “state publicly that you will ensure Mr. Assange receives the rights and protections to which he is entitled.”

On December 9, 2010, the assembled audience applauded leading commentator Laurie Oakes, who was accepting the Walkley Award for “most outstanding contribution to journalism,” when he lambasted Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott for their statements against Assange and WikiLeaks. Oakes declared: “To brand what the WikiLeaks site has done as illegal ... is demeaning ... I think as journalists we should make that our view.”

In 2011, the Sydney Peace Foundation at the University of Sydney awarded Assange its special “gold medal for human rights.” Its then director, academic Stuart Rees, compared him to 18th century American revolutionary Tom Paine and “Pentagon Papers” whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.

Rees declared: “Assange has championed the people's right to know and has challenged the centuries-old tradition

that governments are entitled to keep the public in a state of ignorance. In the Paine, Ellsberg and Assange cases, those in power moved quickly to silence their critics even by perverting the course of justice.” That same year, WikiLeaks won the Walkley Award.

At that time, the Greens, trade union officials and various self-styled “left” groupings vowed their support for Assange and demanded his freedom.

The situation today could not be more different. At a time of the greatest urgency in the fight to mobilise opposition to the persecution of Julian Assange, the silence within the Australian political, media, legal and academic establishment is deafening. The Greens are playing a particularly despicable role. After posturing for years as defenders of Assange, Green parliamentarians such as Adam Bandt and Lee Rhiannon have not even commented on the actions of the Ecuadorian government.

Since 2011, a profound political shift has taken place, in response to sharpening great power tensions, ever-widening social inequality and mounting class antagonisms. Internationally, the upper middle-class “liberals” and “lefts” have progressively made their peace with the crimes and depravities of imperialism.

The main concern of the ex-liberal, ex-left milieu today is the fact that the capitalist elite of the US and its allies—from which the upper middle class of the imperialist countries derives its own considerable income and wealth—are losing strategic and economic ground to rivals such as China and Russia. In Australia, one of the central preoccupations of this fetid layer is promoting the nationalist, pro-war witch-hunt against purported “Chinese interference” and “foreign influence” in politics, business and society.

Moreover, the upper middle-class ex-left is deeply fearful that millions of workers and youth are breaking with the parties and organisations which, directly or indirectly, are the source of their highly-paid positions and privileged status. These include the Democratic Party and trade unions in the United States, and the Labor Party, the unions and the Greens in Australia.

A significant shift against Assange occurred during the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Former supporters of WikiLeaks reacted with overt hostility when it leaked emails that exposed the sordid machinations by the campaign of war-monger and big business Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton to undermine Bernie Sanders in the primaries, and her sycophantic relations with the Wall Street bankers.

Already repulsed by the pro-war and anti-working class policies of the Obama administration, millions of American workers and youth who voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 did not vote for Clinton, contributing to Trump’s electoral

college victory. Within the layer that is hysterically blaming the electoral debacle of the Democrats and Clinton on “Russian meddling,” Assange has been absurdly denounced as a stooge of Moscow.

The defenders of the Democratic Party, Australian Labor, and similar reactionary organisations internationally, do not conceal their class-motivated desire to see Assange and WikiLeaks silenced.

The truth is that Julian Assange has, despite the difficulty of his circumstances, continued what he and others established WikiLeaks to do: provide a means to bring into the light of day the lies and criminality of the powers-that-be and inform the mass of population.

The social force that can and must bring its immense strength to bear in defence of Julian Assange is the class that benefits from his actions and those of other principled journalists and whistleblowers: the international working class. The truth about the real relations that exist under the capitalist profit system is a critical factor in the development of a mass political movement for revolutionary social change.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* statement calling for an International Coalition Against Internet Censorship stressed: “It is not simply that the involvement of the working class is important in order to defend free speech. Rather, the fight to defend free speech is important for the working class.”

A mass movement of the working class, which links the struggle for its social and democratic rights with opposition to militarism and war, will also provide leadership to the substantial layers of the middle class who have been intimidated into silence by the right-wing shift of the ex-liberals and pseudo-left.

The SEP (Australia), as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is committed to the defence of Julian Assange. The fight for his freedom is part of the struggle for the interests of the working class against Australian and world capitalism and for a future of social equality, genuine democracy and international unity. We urge all those who want to join this historic struggle to attend our public meetings.



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