

Jeremy Corbyn silent on persecution of Julian Assange

Laura Tiernan
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WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange has been held incommunicado inside Ecuador's embassy in London for more than one month. His full period of confinement without charge—a crime under international law—stands at 2,710 days.

Ecuador blocked Assange's phone and Internet access on March 28, depriving him of all visitors, after a meeting in Quito one day earlier with the US military's Southern Command. Ecuador stated that Twitter posts by Assange on Catalonia and the Skripal affair had "put at risk" Ecuador's relations with the United Kingdom, the European Union and "other nations."

The circumstances of Assange's political asylum in central London resemble a prison cell. Less than 200 metres from Harrods, conditions at 3 Hans Crescent fully conform to those of "cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment" outlawed under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

It is more than two years since a United Nations human rights panel ruled that Assange's persecution by the Swedish and British governments amounts to "arbitrary detention" and a violation of international law. Yet the noose around Assange is tightening. Ecuador's gag order follows statements made last year by US Attorney General Jeff Sessions that the arrest and prosecution of Assange is a "priority."

"Whenever a case can be made, we will seek to put some people in jail," Sessions told reporters on April 21 when questioned about Assange. A secret Grand Jury empanelled in Virginia, home of the Pentagon and CIA, has prepared multiple charges against Assange and WikiLeaks, including under the 1917 Espionage Act.

In November 2010, after WikiLeaks published a selection of leaked US diplomatic cables that further exposed US political-military intrigue across the globe, the Obama administration launched a political manhunt against Assange without modern precedent.

The WikiLeaks Collateral Murder video had gone viral six months earlier, exposing atrocities routinely suppressed by

the corporate media's embedded journalists. WikiLeaks' Afghan War and Iraq War Logs had followed.

Hillary Clinton and vice president Joe Biden responded with efforts to frame Assange as a "high-tech terrorist" who threatened "global security." The *New York Times* and the *Guardian* served as willing media partners, churning out poisonous "profile" pieces on Assange and recycling propaganda and lies supplied by the Pentagon. They fomented hostility toward WikiLeaks stretching from erstwhile "liberals" to the far-right, including calls by prominent US politicians and Fox News hosts that he be executed.

Millions of workers and young people around the world are deeply concerned over Assange's fate. On Saturday, WikiLeaks retweeted data showing 1.3 million tweets a day since March 28, by more than 20,000 contributors in 124 cities across the globe demanding #Ecuador #ReconnectJulian. But opposition to his treatment is being blocked and sidelined by the official "left". In Britain, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, along with Momentum, the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Stop the War Coalition have worked collectively to prevent any mobilisation of the working class in defence of Assange.

Since he was elected leader in September 2015, Jeremy Corbyn has made no public statement in Assange's defence. Corbyn has refused to condemn the May government's preparations to arrest Assange should he leave the embassy and has offered no guarantee that a Labour government will block his extradition to the US.

As a backbencher, Corbyn was relatively free to criticise policy issues without any danger this would become party policy. Even so, and despite his role as chairman of the Stop the War Coalition, his statements on Assange were few and far between.

On December 8, 2010, Corbyn tweeted: "USA and others don't like any scrutiny via wikileaks and they are leaning on everybody to pillory Assange. What happened to free speech?"

One year later, on December 5, 2011, Corbyn spoke out in

the House of Commons, criticising the potential use of a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) to extradite Assange to Sweden where he faced trumped-up sexual assault allegations, without any charges having been laid: “It is not our business to protect criminals, but it is our business to ensure that people get a fair trial and that there is absolutely the presumption of innocence before any conviction is made.”

This would prove to be the high point—and pretty much the final word—in Corbyn’s efforts to protect the besieged journalist. Assange’s barbaric confinement has continued for six long years, yet Corbyn has done nothing over this time to publicly challenge Assange’s oppressors.

It is possible that Corbyn “privately” opposes the anti-democratic treatment of Assange, just as he “morally” objects to nuclear war and the UK bombing of Syria. But Corbyn’s moral qualms are meaningless—he delivered a free vote on Syria that resulted in resumed RAF bombing raids and rubberstamped Labour’s official manifesto committing to the Trident nuclear programme. On every occasion Corbyn’s conscientious objections are subordinate to his unswerving defence of the British Labour Party and the capitalist state it defends.

The Labour Party is committed to Assange’s ongoing persecution.

In March 2013, Ecuador tried to win an assurance from Labour that it would not support his extradition if Assange were to leave the embassy. A source told the *Independent*, “Ecuador wants to see the current situation resolved but has lost all faith in the current government’s willingness to do that. They have approached the Labour party in the hope of striking a deal for after the election. They do not believe that it is beneficial for Mr. Assange to be resident permanently in the London embassy.”

According to media reports, Ecuador’s ambassador Ana Alban raised the issue with Labour’s then Shadow Foreign Office Minister with a responsibility for human rights, Kerry McCarthy, who refused to give any such assurance. “Labour were quick to distance themselves from the issue, maintaining that Assange is not a policy issue until after the election,” reported RT.

Despite Corbyn becoming leader, based on a promise to end the pro-austerity and pro-war policies of New Labour, there has been no change in Labour’s official policy on Assange.

An interview with the *New Statesman* in July 2015 is the last public statement by Corbyn on the issue this reporter has been able to find. It was made two months prior to his election as leader:

“New Statesman: Do you still support Julian Assange, of WikiLeaks fame? Do you still think he’s ‘imprisoned’ in

the Ecuadorean embassy in London?

“Jeremy Corbyn: He’s taken himself into the embassy because he felt that, had he been taken back to Sweden, he would be taken forcibly to the US. The Swedish are unclear about what would happen to him in Sweden. I think it would be much better if the Swedish authorities investigated the case against him, decided whether there was a case for a prosecution or not, and dealt with it that way, while guaranteeing that under no circumstances would he be extradited to the US.”

Note the subtle elision “has taken himself into the embassy.” The *New Statesman* interview was part of a flurry of media engagements that followed Corbyn’s surprise nomination to Labour’s leadership contest. The process of moulding and self-remoulding had begun.

Were Corbyn a real workers’ leader, he would appeal directly to the millions of workers and young people who support him to rally in defence of Assange. He would explain that Assange has played a historic role in exposing war crimes and anti-democratic conspiracies by imperialist governments all over the world and that his freedom is a life and death issue for the working class, especially its younger generation.

But Corbyn is not a workers’ leader. In the current Labour Manifesto “For the Many, Not the Few”, the words “Julian Assange” and “WikiLeaks” do not appear once. Corbyn’s silence is based on political calculations that form part of the daily conspiracies of British imperialism against the working class. His silence on Assange, like his backing of NATO, Trident and the 2016 bombing of Syria, underscores a basic truth that there is no reformist answer to the capitalist drive to war and dictatorship.

The fight for Assange’s freedom can proceed only through an implacable fight against the pro-war Labour Party and its chief apologist, Corbyn. The only social force that defends democratic rights and opposes war is the international working class. The Socialist Equality Party in Britain, along with its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, will do all in its power to fight for Assange’s freedom and urges workers and youth to attend our forthcoming meetings against war, lies and censorship: For the building of a socialist anti-war movement!



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