

“I don’t think Assange will be forgiven by our rulers because he educated the world”

Join the June 19 London vigil demanding freedom for Julian Assange!

Robert Stevens
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Emmy Butlin is part of a group that has maintained a solidarity vigil in defence of Julian Assange for six years outside the Ecuadorian embassy in London. The WikiLeaks editor was forced to take asylum there in June 2012. On June 19, the Julian Assange Defence Committee is holding a vigil to mark the sixth anniversary of the date Assange entered the building.

The World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party is backing the vigil and working to secure maximum attendance. Emmy spoke to WSWs reporter Robert Stevens about the work of the group and the Julian Assange case.

Robert Stevens: Can you tell us about your group and its work?

Emmy Butlin: I want to emphasise that we are not affiliated with any political organisation. Some of us have had experience with activism before. We have not worked in human rights work, we are not lawyers, we are not involved with Amnesty. We are ordinary people.

We have become experts in this case over a very long time and we want to assist in any way we can. The lady who owns the website we have is based in Wales. She’s done work with Chelsea Manning’s family and put together a family fund to assist relations of Chelsea who travel to the US.

Another is Ciaron O’Reilly. He did a 25-day non-stop vigil at the Embassy from March 28 to highlight Assange’s case and urge people to be vigilant because we expected the worse.

When the communications were cut off from Assange [by the Ecuadorian government], we tried to support Ciaron, going to accompany him two hours at a time.

We have a Twitter page, and Facebook account. Julian Assange needs defending to be able to continue his work. We support the work of WikiLeaks.

We focus specifically to the circumstances of his detainment, and his confinement in the Ecuadorian Embassy, the role of the police and the surveillance. Then there is the mindlessness of the persecution of this man over a long period of time and the corruption of the legal process.

RS: Can you tell us about your background?

EB: I was born in Greece in 1970, in the middle of the seven-year junta, which was a police state. Greece had had a lot of political instability in the century, full of war and political repression.

The geopolitical game that was played in Greece led to the most horrendous civil war, after the end of World War Two. My own family suffered from the division and the conflict in the civil war.

In 1967, the colonels overthrew the legally elected government. As I was growing up democracy was taking its first steps and I was fully aware that it was a painful and slow process. My parents during the dictatorship found themselves in trouble with the police because they were active in

the early sixties in Munich in Germany as students. They were active in the peace movement there, and they knew that the local Greek consulate was collecting information on them.

They returned to Greece in 1966. Soon after that the dictatorship took place, and very quickly they found themselves being taken in for questioning. My father was imprisoned for two weeks, in the same place people were being tortured. For the entire seven years they had to undergo surveillance, and this affected their life profoundly. They became founding members of the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Party (PASOK).

I became politically aware of what was going on there and took part in demonstrations, marches, etc. People became political in this period. After the return to democracy, there was jubilation, and people felt they could demand openly and without repercussion social demands for equality within the law, between men and women. They could demand workers’ rights, so you had the trade unions organising marches. There were debates and intellectual discussion. There was the role of the US taking over from Britain. You had the role of the CIA in the invasion of Cyprus. I left Greece in 1990 to come over here to study at university and I got married.

In April of 2010, WikiLeaks released the “Collateral Murder” video, and this affected me profoundly as both myself and my family were against the Iraq war. I was really shaken because the invasion of Iraq was a horrible event. When Julian Assange was arrested in December 2010, I knew it was wrong. At the same time, in November 2010, they did the Afghan war logs and in December 2010 they started publications of the diplomatic cables. I was waiting for the Greek stuff to come out.

I was following what was going on with Assange’s case in Sweden, and the open warfare against him with politicians and dignitaries in the media. Then there was the case of Chelsea Manning, at the time Bradley Manning. I could not be left untouched by the stories of these two people.

It was not until he entered the embassy in 2012 that I felt I needed to do something and began participating in the solidarity vigil.

RS: What did you think about what the British judicial system did to Assange in trampling on his democratic rights?

EB: When they started the extradition process, I realised that this was a very unfair system. I investigated the European Arrest Warrant [EAW] system and it was the British government that had pushed this forward, because of terrorist attacks in 2007. But this system was abused. It was not used to extradite terrorists.

The question came up, why are we witnessing this? Is there not another way of questioning Julian Assange? Are there other ways of accommodating the process that started in Sweden? Then I started to investigate in more detail, the “sexual misconduct,” or “assault.” And it’s

not easy to do this, as you can imagine. Accusations of sexual misconduct have a stigma.

I found that the whole process had been politicised. Britain was not interested in furthering this case. The Swedish prosecutor responsible for the case, Marianne Nye, was sitting on her hands. Julian Assange was never charged.

After a while, the European Parliament did a review of the EAW out of which the UK Parliament passed an amendment that said no person should be extradited on an EAW unless charges have been laid down. So, I thought that's it. They will now be forced to go down the route of Mutual Legal Assistance with Assange. But no, this didn't happen. The amendment was not retroactive. Julian Assange did not benefit from the law, but everyone else after him did.

A couple of years later, the Supreme Court decided on another case, and they looked at the decision that the judges applied in the Assange case and they threw it out. But there was no appeal allowed for Assange. Every time there was a development you thought would move things forward, no one is interested.

Finally, when the UN in 2016, after looking at the case for 18 months, deemed Assange was arbitrarily detained, we thought this would be the catalyst. But no. The Conservative government said that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention were lay people and didn't know what they were talking about.

Whatever happens to Julian Assange, his work is lasting, and it has changed the world. Whereas these ideas have always been around about accountability and knowledge, through the technology available with the Internet, he has catapulted this idea to a level never seen before. It's extremely inspiring and he's not alone.

I don't think Assange will be forgiven by our rulers because he educated the world. Original documents which he published can be used in court, they can be used as sources for writing books, for telling the story as it is.

So, among the many functions that WikiLeaks plays, it's a contemporary historian.

RS: What support have you had for Julian Assange outside the Embassy?

EB: Overwhelmingly positive. Most people know about the case and they want to know the latest. I'm surprised at how wise people are to immediately grasp what's going on. They have seen it happen again and again where dissent to the status quo, especially in international affairs, provokes a backlash that can be devastating for people.

Politicians think people are fools, but I don't think so. Even if you are not entirely educated in international affairs, you grasp that there is an injustice going on. "Of course, he is in there because the US want him." All these years I've heard this again and again.

Public opinion can be manipulated, but only up to an extent. There is a dichotomy between the politicians and what people think. Look at Brexit. That's an alert for the establishment that people feel very differently. Whoever is part of the establishment is out of touch.

Again and again, I come across British people who say about Julian Assange, "Enough is enough. Let this man go." A lot of the people who we come into contact regularly are drivers, because Harrods is next to the Embassy. There are a lot of wealthy individuals who shop there and their drivers will park in the local area. The drivers are international, from a lot of Middle Eastern countries. They are behind Julian Assange absolutely. It's the same with continental Europeans. They recognise the importance of free speech and democratic rights.

I spent some time talking to a German lady outside the Embassy about the case. Before she left, she pulled her jumper up on her arm and she showed me that she had, from her elbow to her hand, a WikiLeaks hourglass logo as a tattoo. So, I thought I was informing her, but she had the WikiLeaks tattoo on her arm. That's how important it was to her.

Particularly young people are inspired by WikiLeaks, inspired by [Edward] Snowden.

We have marched in London on the Pride event for Chelsea Manning and there was so much support for her. We've only recently been doing some marches for Julian, as we thought this is a crisis. We went on the May Day march on May 1. Some of us joined that and the TUC May 12 anti-austerity march with our Assange banner.

I knew nothing about Ecuador, but have learnt a lot more since learning about the Assange case. Because of their experience of dictatorship, they have strengthened the laws and constitution for the protection of people who are persecuted politically.

For a long period, they have been supportive and tried to unlock the situation and get him to Ecuador safely.

Then a year ago there was a change of government in Ecuador. Mr. [President Lenin] Moreno is from the same party as Mr. [former president Rafael] Correa and he said initially that he would support Julian Assange. But we saw that he didn't have the same commitment. His government is seeking a rapprochement with the United States and is going to renew military cooperation. I know from my own country, Greece, what that means. When you align yourself militarily with a powerful country, you sign up for a lot more.

We are very concerned, particularly now that Assange's communications have been cut off. We do not hear his voice.

Julian Assange has been in there for coming up to six years and it's inhumane and is taking its toll. You have horrifying reports from doctors on him. This must be sorted. He can't die in there.

The UN is the final arbitrator in international conflict. The UN Group on Arbitrary Detention look at the facts. It's an adversarial process. The UK put forward its case and Julian Assange's lawyers put forward their case. And the UN group gave their expert opinion that ruled in his favour. They said very simply: free him and compensate him. Under international law its rulings are binding.

The UK and Sweden in rejecting the ruling are degrading the institution that all countries turn to for arbitration and resolution of conflict.

You don't have to be an expert on human rights. Over the last six years, Julian Assange has had no sunlight. No access to health care, no outside exercise. He has medical care where it can be accommodated within the embassy. But has no possibility of having an MRI scan, for example. He has a heart condition and needs root canal treatment. The doctors also said that because of the level of surveillance that he was experiencing, he was unable to openly speak with his doctors about his medical problems. Intrusive surveillance, 24/7, over a period of six years, with every conversation he has recorded, isn't that intolerable? Isn't that what nightmares are made of? It's an abomination.

Then you see the response of the politicians to him. Recently in Westminster, Conservatives minister Alan Duncan referred to Assange as a "miserable little worm." What sort of statement is that from a minister of government? It's not just arrogance against Julian Assange. It is arrogance against the people.

I find again and again that people's stance on Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, it's like the bar against how you judge who they are. Everyone has the right to health care. People in prison have access to it and we recognise their right to sunshine, physical exercise and fresh air. When we find that prisons are failing, often heads will roll. Here you have a situation where none of this matters if your name is Julian Assange.

Now it's Julian Assange, tomorrow it's someone else and then someone else and someone else.

RS: The Australian government has refused to defend Assange, including the previous Gillard Labour government, and here Labour and the unions have done nothing to defend him. Can you speak about that?

EB: I think he is being ostracised by them because it's convenient to do so. He exhibits tremendous courage in the simple determination to publish

material, but it's telling how little courage those you mention have. It's very disappointing and I don't really have an answer. I think in part it's because they feel threatened. A few years ago, when Jeremy Corbyn was bidding for the Labour leadership, it was a bit like Assange. There was a torrent of attacks in the media. WikiLeaks at the time made a call for any leaks on this, calling for "Labour leaks," and in response there was complete silence, even from Corbyn's own supporters.

I also think their response has to do with foreign policy and issues of war. WikiLeaks leads to a strengthening of anti-war sentiment. And this is an area that cuts across political parties. They act in the same way, whether it is Australia or the UK. What is the big difference between the foreign policy of the Labour Party and the Conservative Party traditionally? So perhaps when someone is a strong advocate for peace and against military interventions, and let's call it the old-fashioned word, "imperialism," then perhaps that's why national institutions are buying into the attacks on Assange.

What is the objective here? What is the next step? Detention in a UK maximum security establishment? How can this be justified on a flimsy arrest warrant, over bail conditions, over an extradition case that has been abandoned and has cost the taxpayer millions.

It's important we act. People should come down to the embassy to participate in solidarity events. Journalists should research and report what is going on.

WikiLeaks recently published a video showing a car with individuals who were surveying the embassy way into the night. Who are these people? They were there around the clock, with a 24-hour presence for three weeks in April.

Up to October 2015, there were overt police with a 24/7 presence. You could see them at specific locations. After that the Metropolitan Police said they were increasing the covert operation, which was always taking place anyway. I have written to the London Assembly about it. It's the elected body that controls mayoral spending and of course Sadiq Khan is responsible for the police spend in London. I have asked the assembly to confirm or deny, but they couldn't because the police said they don't comment on operational matters.

WikiLeaks invited people to try to figure out what one of the people was reading in the car. Out of that it came out that there were instructions on a piece of paper and the name "Op Kudo"—Operation Kudo. One of the people who investigated this on the WikiLeaks Twitter thread confirmed that is the name of the operation to snatch Assange. It must have been going on for years and must have a budget.

Stefania Maurizi is an investigative journalist with *La Repubblica* and she has been trying through Freedom of Information requests to get documents pertaining to the case from Sweden. She also has documents from the UK, but they were redacted. She took the government to court last year and she unearthed that, back in August, the UK Crown Prosecution Service deleted a large number of emails pertaining to the case while it was still active.

RS: We recently held a series of meetings in Australia and the UK to demand Assange's freedom and young people were very responsive. How important do you think international campaigns and protests are?

EB: I think it's a wonderful thing. First, it's inspiring for others and activists around the world, and that is what we need to hear, the public's voice. That is where the wisdom lies. This is exactly my experience speaking to people on the streets of London. People recognise the role that WikiLeaks has played. They know the way Assange is being treated is because of the work he has done. It is humbling to say, but some people congratulate us for being there. Some people clap. We express their own feelings.

But what is missing, this is what your organisation can provide—the linking up with others. This is how we can change the world. Individual contributions are great, but we change society as a group, acting together.

We need a Julian Assange Defence Committee of the world, if you like, that will bring people together—workers, students, housewives.

RS: We have initiated an international coalition to fight Internet censorship of socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive websites, organizations and activists. And we have insisted that any serious campaign cannot be carried out while Julian Assange is silenced and is incarcerated. Our campaign demands the freedom of Julian Assange and is organising internationally to achieve that goal.

EB: I think that's wonderful. It is spot on. That is excellent work.

Emmy's group operates the vigil outside the Ecuadorean Embassy on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, 3-5 p.m. People can sign up to the mailing list of the Julian Assange Defence Committee: Grassroots solidarity for the WikiLeaks editor at www.WiseUpAction.info.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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