

Break the silence on the danger facing Julian Assange

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The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* are at the forefront of a global fight against concerted efforts by governments to eviscerate democratic rights, impose censorship on the Internet and prepare dictatorial forms of rule.

The ruling elite is seeking to silence dissent out of fear that a growing movement of the working class against social inequality will erupt into a direct struggle against the capitalist system itself.

In stark contrast to our stance, a host of organisations and individuals are assisting the drive to overturn democratic rights. One sharp indicator is their silence over the grave danger that faces WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange.

The Australian-born journalist faces the imminent threat of being deprived of the political asylum he was granted inside Ecuador's London embassy in 2012. He would be taken into custody by British authorities, then handed over to the US government. However, there has been not a word of public opposition by numerous figures who previously spoke out in his defence.

This situation cannot be explained by lack of popular support for Assange. WikiLeaks' ongoing publication of secret documents, which expose war crimes and government and corporate intrigues, is viewed with tremendous admiration.

Nor does the silence stem from lack of awareness that the destruction of WikiLeaks would have immense implications. If Assange is imprisoned, or worse, it would have a chilling impact on whistleblowers exposing government and corporate outrages, and threaten the work of critical publications and journalists.

The silence over Assange, and therefore complicity in his persecution, stems from a profound shift within a layer that previously postured as "liberal," "left" and, in some cases, even "socialist."

Assange, an Australian citizen, was entitled to the full protection of the Australian government when his civil liberties were flagrantly attacked by the United States, Britain and Sweden.

In December 2010, Australian media outlets voiced outrage over Assange being taken into custody by British police. Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her Labor Party government were denounced for labelling WikiLeaks' work as "illegal" and offering to assist the US lay charges against Assange.

Millions of people viewed the arrest warrant issued to extradite Assange to Sweden, purportedly to answer "questions" over alleged sexual offences, as a politically-motivated frame-up to shut down WikiLeaks and render its editor to the United States.

On December 6, 2010, the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published an "Open Letter" to Gillard. Signed initially by 200 lawyers, academics, journalists, actors, politicians and former intelligence agents—and then by thousands more—the letter insisted that Gillard "state publicly that you will ensure Mr Assange receives the rights and protections to which he is entitled."

Among the prominent signatories were leading Australian Greens representatives, Bob Brown, Scott Ludlam and Adam Bandt; journalist Antony Loewenstein; philosophy professor Peter Singer; and Jeff Lawrence, then secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Here are only a few examples of what was said in the following days:

* Independent member of parliament Andrew Wilkie, a former intelligence agent who was a whistleblower on the Iraq "weapons of mass destruction" lies, said on December 8, 2010 the Labor government had "defaulted to the interests of the US... rather than the interests of an Australian citizen."

* On December 10, Greens "left" senator Lee Rhiannon told a rally called to defend Assange: "Gillard has said that WikiLeaks' activities are illegal, but she can't tell us what the laws are that they have broken." At the same event, Pip Hinman of the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance said the Australian government "must speak up for Julian Assange and demand his release from custody."

* The editors and news directors of most Australian

newspapers and television stations issued a joint statement on December 15, declaring: “To aggressively attempt to shut WikiLeaks down, to threaten to prosecute those who publish official leaks, and to pressure companies to cease doing commercial business with WikiLeaks, is a serious threat to democracy.”

* Later that month, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the journalists’ union, granted membership to Assange. ACTU president Ged Kearney ceremonially presented his membership card to one of his lawyers. Kearney stated: “WikiLeaks has broken no Australian law and, as an Australian citizen, Julian Assange should be supported by the Australian government, not prematurely convicted.”

Today, Assange remains the principled and courageous editor of the media organisation WikiLeaks. He is not guilty of any crime. He was compelled to jump bail in 2012 to avoid extradition to Sweden and potential transfer to the US.

The US government’s determination to charge Assange with “espionage” for publishing whistleblower leaks remains a “threat to democracy.”

And the Australian government, now headed by the Liberal-National Coalition, is still allowing the violation of the rights of an Australian citizen, leaving him in conditions that a United Nations agency condemned two years ago as “arbitrary detention” and a “contravention of his fundamental human rights.”

However, amid a deepening crisis of global capitalism, the media, the unions and the upper middle class have not raised a word about Assange. They are instead preoccupied with defending their own national state and corporate elite.

In November 2011, the Gillard government revealed why it labelled Assange a criminal. It unconditionally endorsed the US military and strategic “pivot” to Asia against China and granted permission for the basing of US marines and aircraft in northern Australia.

Since then, virtually the entire establishment has fallen in behind the US-Australian effort to maintain American dominance in the region by undermining China and threatening it with war.

The mass media today is spearheading, not a fight to defend free speech, but a campaign against purported “Chinese interference” in Australia. The media, especially the ABC and Fairfax Media publications, is conducting a witch hunt against “Chinese agents of influence”—defined as anyone who opposes, or even questions, Australia’s collaboration with US imperialism.

Assange has barely been mentioned for years, and generally only to slander him and denounce WikiLeaks.

The trade unions will not defend Assange because it means opposing the pro-imperialist Labor Party and the US-

Australia alliance. All their activities are geared toward promoting the re-election of a Labor government. Moreover, the unions suppress opposition to their own decades-long collaboration with the ruling elite against the working class, and seek to stop workers exchanging views and organising independently via social media platforms.

The Greens and pseudo-left organisations orbit the union apparatus and likewise seek to head off the explosive discontent among workers and youth, and channel them back behind Labor. None has issued a statement on Assange, or called for his defence.

The standpoint of the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement, is that the defence of democratic rights, which includes the fight against censorship and for Assange’s freedom, is critical to the development of the growing working class movement internationally against inequality, oppression, exploitation and the danger of war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Australian section of the ICFI, has organised a demonstration at Sydney Town Hall Square on Sunday, June 17 at 1:00 p.m. to demand that the Australian government act immediately to secure Assange’s freedom and his safe return to Australia.

The demonstration will not be built by appeals to the pro-imperialist political, trade union and media establishment that has abandoned Assange. It will be built by the political mobilisation of the working class, independently of and against them.

The SEP calls on all defenders of civil liberties and democratic rights to circulate information about June 17 in factories, workplaces, campuses and schools across the country and throughout social media.

The silence over the danger facing Julian Assange must be broken.



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