

Australian officials visit Julian Assange as campaign to free him expands

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On Thursday, two Australian consular officials met with WikiLeaks' editor and Australian citizen Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he sought political asylum on June 19, 2012. The officials were accompanied by Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson.

The visit is the first made by Australian government representatives to the courageous journalist in the six years since he was effectively imprisoned inside the embassy, faced with the threat of extradition to the United States to face trial on espionage and other charges.

Assange's health has seriously deteriorated over the past six years. Throughout this time, he has been living in conditions that a United Nations working group condemned in December 2015 as "arbitrary detention," a "deprivation of liberty" and a violation of his human rights.

Since March 28, 2018, Assange has faced further mistreatment. Under pressure from Washington, the Ecuadorian government has deprived him of any form of communication with the outside world, including visitors. It has, moreover issued its own threats to renege on Assange's asylum in the embassy, and to hand him over to waiting British police.

No details of the discussions between the Australian officials and Assange and his legal team have been made public. Lawyer Jennifer Robinson stated only that, "Julian Assange is in a very serious situation, detained without charge for seven-and-a-half years. He remains in the embassy because of the risk of extradition to the US. That risk is undeniable after numerous statements by Trump administration officials, including the director of the CIA and the US attorney-general.

"Given the delicate diplomatic situation, we cannot

comment further at this time."

In November 2010, Assange came under ferocious attack from the American government after WikiLeaks published information that exposed US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and its anti-democratic diplomatic intrigues around the world. Open death threats were made against him, and a secret grand jury convened by the Obama administration to indict him for espionage—a charge that can carry the death penalty.

The Australian Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard responded to the US threats by throwing its own citizen to the wolves. Gillard refused to defend Assange or even condemn the US government for its actions. Instead, she joined with Obama in denouncing WikiLeaks for its "illegal" actions, while her attorney-general declared that Australia would assist the US in prosecuting him.

Each subsequent Australian government, including the present Liberal-National Coalition headed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, has refused to meet its obligations to defend Assange. All of them have regarded the US-Australia military alliance as more important to the Australian establishment than the democratic rights of one of its citizens.

The decision by the Turnbull government to send officials to visit Assange was made within the context of a growing international campaign demanding that the WikiLeaks' editor be granted his immediate and unconditional freedom.

On May 28, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* called for international action to defend Assange and extended its full endorsement to the vigil being prepared by WikiLeaks' supporters outside the Ecuadorian embassy in London on June 19, and to any other vigils being organised.

In the same statement, the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), with the support of journalist, film-maker and WikiLeaks' defender John Pilger, announced a demonstration to be held at Sydney Town Hall Square on Sunday, June 17. The rally will demand of the Turnbull government that it honour its responsibilities to Julian Assange and act immediately to secure his freedom and his right to return to Australia, with guaranteed protection from any US request for his extradition.

During the 12 days since, WikiLeaks and other organisations have publicly promoted the June 17 demonstration and June 19 vigils, along with other principled defenders of democratic rights and freedom of speech. These include: civil liberties lawyer Julian Burnside; singer-songwriter Roger Waters; Terry Hicks; the Courage Foundation; US activist Kevin Zeese; journalist and film-maker Antony Loewenstein; prominent Sri Lankan filmmakers and authors Prasanna Vithanage and Aruna Premarathne; journalist Chris Hedges; and prominent retired Australian academic Professor Stuart Rees.

Despite virtual blanket censorship by the world's media about the Socialist Equality Party demonstration, the vigils and other activities to defend Assange, momentum is building behind the renewed campaign to win his freedom. Additional demonstrations and vigils have been called in Sri Lanka, India, Washington DC and other American cities. A list of events internationally can be viewed here.

Julian Assange has committed no crime. He is a journalist who has made an immense contribution to the exposure of great power criminality and abuses. The American state and its allies are seeking to destroy WikiLeaks and Assange as part of a broader agenda of censoring, silencing and intimidating every critical and independent media organisation.

Every effort must be made to mobilise the strength of the working class to demand his immediate and unconditional right to leave the Ecuadorian embassy, with guaranteed protection against extradition.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on June 6: "Around the world, millions of working-class people are entering into immense struggles for their social right to decent living standards, education and health care, and against the persecution of refugees and immigrants, police-state policies and the threat of war.

These struggles are inseparable from the fight for democratic rights, including an end to Internet censorship and the defence of a free, critical and independent media, such as WikiLeaks."

It is critical that maximum pressure is exerted, in the UK, Australia, the US and internationally, to demand an end to the persecution of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.



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