

The Turnbull government must act to repatriate Australian citizen Julian Assange to Australia

James Cogan
19 June 2018

The Socialist Equality Party of Australia held a rally on Sunday, June 17 in Sydney's Town Hall Square to demand the freedom of Julian Assange. The rally was attended by several hundred people who supported the demand that the Australian government act to secure the right of Assange, an Australian citizen, to leave the Ecuadorian embassy in London and return to Australia with guarantees that he not be arrested or extradited to the United States. Below is the speech given to the rally by SEP National Secretary James Cogan.

Today's rally is part of an international struggle to secure the freedom of Julian Assange, to defend WikiLeaks, and to fight against all forms of censorship and attacks on an independent and critical media. It is a crucial struggle for the working class, because it is part of the greater struggle for all the social and democratic rights of the vast mass of humanity.

A powerful mass movement of workers is developing on a world scale. After decades in which the working class has been suppressed by the treachery of its old labour and union organisations and subjected to an endless assault by the corporate oligarchy, it is coming forward.

Powerful waves of strike action and political opposition are taking place: for decent wages, health care, education and a healthy and safe environment, in the US, Europe, India, China and internationally.

Workers and youth are also becoming increasingly aware of, and concerned about, the danger of war, in these times when the American president speaks casually of using nuclear weapons and "totally destroying" entire countries.

One cannot understand the determination of the American ruling elite to silence WikiLeaks and Assange without an understanding of its fear of the working class.

The capitalist ruling classes and their representatives in the US and internationally are terrified of the power that the Internet provides to the working class, to ordinary people.

It gives them access to alternative analysis and news; the ability to exchange information and opinions; and to politically organise across national borders: to unite together as an international force.

Julian Assange explained this well in the statement he sent to our publication, the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), endorsing the online forum the WSWS held on January 16, 2018 to oppose Internet censorship. Julian wrote:

"While the Internet has brought about a revolution in people's ability to educate themselves and others, the resulting democratic phenomenon has shaken existing establishments to their core. Google, Facebook and their Chinese equivalents, who are socially, logistically and financially integrated with existing elites, have moved to re-establish discourse control."

The ruling class is seeking to re-establish its control over the political discourse by trying to destroy the hard-won democratic rights of the

working class, impose censorship and control over the Internet, and silence and suppress oppositional voices.

Julian Assange and WikiLeaks are one of the principal oppositional voices.

He is being persecuted by the US, British and Australian governments because they are hostile to everything WikiLeaks represents. From its establishment in 2006, the mission of WikiLeaks was to provide whistleblowers, who had knowledge of criminal conduct by governments, state agencies or corporations, with a secure and anonymous means to leak that information.

WikiLeaks guaranteed that leaks would be published without vetting and, through the power of the Internet, made available to the entire world.

In 2010, WikiLeaks was entrusted, by a courageous whistleblower in the US military, to let the world know the full extent of the crimes being committed by US imperialism against the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. Tens of millions watched in horror and outrage the "Collateral Murder" video published by WikiLeaks, which showed a US helicopter gunship massacring unarmed civilians, including two Reuters journalists.

WikiLeaks was further entrusted to publish hundreds of thousands of US diplomatic cables, which reveal how American diplomats around the world are engaged in sordid, anti-democratic intrigues to assert both US strategic interests and the profit interests of US-based corporations.

Chelsea Manning, formerly Private Bradley Manning, spent close to seven years of her life in a prison cell for these courageous leaks.

In Australia, we learnt from the diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks that an entire cabal within the Australian Labor Party government consisted of what the US embassy classifies as its "protected sources"—the people who keep Washington informed and do Washington's bidding.

The people identified as US operatives in the diplomatic cables were those who played the key factional role in ousting Kevin Rudd as prime minister, including current Labor leader Bill Shorten. The Obama administration wanted Rudd out, because he was not sufficiently supportive of America's militarist stance toward China. Rudd's replacement, Julia Gillard, had no hesitation about lining up with Washington.

We can now look back on the momentous events of 2010 with the benefit of hindsight. It is now clear why the Labor government headed by Julia Gillard denounced the publication of the US military and diplomatic leaks by WikiLeaks as "illegal activity." It is clear why Labor declared that it would assist Washington to prosecute Julian Assange.

The Labor government was in the process of aligning Australia fully with US plans for an economic and military offensive to try and prevent China from emerging as a challenge to American—and Australian—strategic and corporate dominance and influence in the Asia-

Pacific region.

Labor, no less than Obama's administration, was hostile to the existence of a media organisation that was fearlessly prepared to publish leaked information that exposed the military and diplomatic conspiracies and intrigues of the ruling elite, and the underlying criminal and predatory nature of the US-Australia military alliance.

In November 2011, behind the backs of the population, Gillard committed the country to the US pivot to Asia, the stationing of US marines in Darwin and increased operations by US aircraft and ships from Australian bases. Her government set in motion a massive Australian military build-up, with tens of billions to be spent on jet fighters, submarines and other war-fighting assets.

That is why Australian officials did nothing to assist Assange fight against manufactured allegations of sexual assault and the warrant to extradite him to Sweden, from where he could have been rapidly extradited on to the United States.

Julian Assange was forced to seek political asylum with Ecuador on June 19, 2012 because he was thrown to the wolves by the Labor Party government in the country where he was born and holds citizenship.

The Coalition government that replaced Labor in 2013 has continued and expanded Canberra's alignment with the US. And that is why it too has supported the ongoing persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks. The Coalition refused to so much as issue a protest to Britain when the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Assange's confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy in London was a "deprivation of liberty" and "violation" of his human rights.

Foreign minister Julie Bishop instead signed a document that declared Australia was "unable to intervene in the due process of another country's court proceedings or legal matters, and we have full confidence in the UK and Swedish judicial system." This was a lie.

The Australian government had and still has undeniable diplomatic power and legal discretion, under international and national law, to intervene to defend an Australian citizen who is being unjustly treated by another state.

In the case of Julian Assange, the issue is that the Australian government has refused to exercise that power and legal discretion. It is instead supporting Washington's vendetta to have Assange hauled to the United States and put on a show trial on charges of espionage.

At this rally, we are not *asking* the Turnbull government to act. We are *telling* it.

We hold the Labor Party and the Coalition parties fully responsible for the harm and outrages committed against Julian Assange. We will hold them responsible for what happens next. They will be held to account by the working class in Australia.

By making an example of Julian Assange, the aim of the Trump administration, the Democratic Party, the CIA, the FBI, and the whole American state apparatus, is to terrorise all journalists and whistleblowers into remaining silent on the crimes of the US ruling class and its allies.

But it is not just the Coalition government and the Labor Party that have lined up with the US government, with the Trump administration, against Julian Assange. As the danger of a military confrontation between the US and its allies with China has grown ever more serious, virtually the entire political and media establishment in Australia has fallen into line with the drive to war.

There is no criticism of the US-Australia military alliance. No criticism of the fact that Pine Gap is the base that provides the targeting information for US nuclear and cruise missiles. No criticism of the fact that Australian intelligence is part of the Five Eyes network that spies on the communications of hundreds of millions of people every day and identifies the targets for provocations and even assassinations. And there is no criticism of the open discussion in US and Australian strategic circles that they are preparing for a war with China—a war that could

escalate into an exchange of nuclear weapons.

Instead, there is total silence, from the media, from the trade unions, from the Greens, from so-called independents such as Andrew Wilkie, and from various organisations that still call themselves "socialist" and "left-wing."

It is therefore no surprise that, as they line up behind the US-Australia war preparations against China, they are also silent on the fate of Julian Assange.

To defend Assange and WikiLeaks means to oppose Canberra's relations with the US state. Today, within the Australian parliament and media, opposing the US alliance is regarded as tantamount to treason.

While it is silent on the situation facing Assange, the Australian political and media establishment is waging a nationalist and xenophobic witch-hunt against purported Chinese interference and Chinese influence. This witch-hunt is nothing more than the ideological and now legal preparation for the criminalisation and suppression of anti-war opposition and the establishment of a police-state.

The WSWs and SEP have stressed from the beginning that a movement to defend Julian Assange cannot be built by appeals to the political, trade union and media establishment that has abandoned him. It will be built by a fight to politically educate and independently mobilise the working class.

What must be explained to workers and young people is that the attack on Assange and WikiLeaks is an attack on them. The persecution of Assange is a sharp expression of the campaign to censor and silence all opposition to social inequality, repression, and the militarist policies of the imperialist states.

The international fight to defend democratic rights and defeat Internet censorship, and defend Assange and WikiLeaks, is inseparable from the struggle to unite the working class internationally to prevent the danger of war.

Over the past three weeks, as we have promoted this rally and the vigils that are taking place on June 19, we have revealed the extent of the support for Assange and WikiLeaks that exists in the working class in Australia and internationally. The establishment has abandoned him. Millions of ordinary people have not.

What governments and political parties do now, at a time when Assange faces immense danger, is not going to be forgotten.

We must develop the widest discussion on the situation that faces Julian Assange in the working class, in the workplaces and factories, at the universities, TAFEs and high schools. We must answer the slanders and lies that are being told about him to try and prevent a campaign for his freedom.

Julian Assange must be free to unconditionally return to Australia now if he chooses to do so, and WikiLeaks must be able to continue unhindered by state persecution. The Socialist Equality Party is committed to that cause.



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