

# After six years confinement: WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange in great danger

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WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange is still trapped inside Ecuador's London embassy, cut off from all communication with the outside world, and in failing health, despite vigils and rallies held internationally this week to demand his freedom.

Demonstrations organised on Tuesday marked the sixth anniversary of him entering the embassy. There he remains an effective political prisoner, with the British government denying him even the right to seek medical treatment.

The protests signalled the renewal of the campaign for his defence, and underscored the enduring support for the courageous journalist and publisher among broad layers of the population.

However, as Jennifer Robinson, a lawyer for Assange, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "AM" radio program yesterday, his situation has become "very difficult."

Robinson reported that Ecuador, which originally granted Assange political asylum six years ago, is "under significant pressure from the US" to force him to leave the embassy. The British police would then arrest him.

"He has been asking for more than seven-and-half years for an assurance for no extradition to the United States," Robinson said, "but Britain has refused to provide one and Australia has refused to ask for it."

The lawyer said Assange was in "terrible circumstances" and "it remains to be seen how long that can go on." The 46-year-old's health is deteriorating and doctors have concerns that the past six years have "had an extreme and likely permanent impact on his physical and mental health."

Ecuador granted Assange asylum to protect him from being extradited by Sweden or Britain to face lengthy imprisonment or a possible death penalty in the United

States. But Ecuador is under intense pressure from the Trump administration, which is intent on putting Assange on trial on conspiracy and espionage charges.

Not only is the British government of Theresa May still refusing to give Assange an assurance against being extradited to the US.

The Australian government of Malcolm Turnbull is still refusing to publicly intervene, with the full weight of its diplomatic powers and legal discretion, to demand that Britain unconditionally release Assange, an Australian citizen, from what was denounced by the UN as a "deprivation of liberty" and violation of his human rights.

Among workers, youth and principled journalists and intellectuals, there is a growing recognition that the defence of Assange and WikiLeaks is critical to the wider fight against Internet censorship and government attacks on free speech.

In large measure, this is a result of the campaign initiated by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Parties. A powerful SEP rally in Sydney last Sunday was followed on Tuesday by pickets in Sri Lanka and India, and vigils in many cities, from Wellington in New Zealand to Washington and San Francisco in the United States. SEP leaders spoke at the events in Melbourne and London.

There remains an almost complete silence by the media, political and "left" milieu, particularly among those who originally defended Assange, who once received awards by prominent bodies for bravely publishing the truth about US war crimes and political plots around the world.

Nevertheless, in response to the growing campaign, voices are beginning to be raised for Assange's defence. Numbers of media sites internationally have published the scathing speech delivered by well-known

journalist and documentary film-maker John Pilger at the SEP's Sydney rally, in which he indicted the "Vichy journalists" who have turned against Assange.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), a US-based organisation, yesterday broke a period of silence and declared that Britain had to reject the use of the US Espionage Act against Assange. In a media statement, HRW reported that Ecuador had denied it permission to visit Assange this May.

HRW said: "The publication of leaks—particularly leaks that show potential government wrongdoing or human rights abuse—is a critical function of a free press in a democratic society. The vague and sweeping provisions of the Espionage Act remain ready to be used against other publishers and journalists, whether they be WikiLeaks or the *New York Times*."

HRW stated: "The UK has the power to resolve concerns over his isolation, health, and confinement by removing the threat of extradition for publishing newsworthy leaks. It should do so before another year passes."

A June 19 editorial in the *Irish Examiner*, an Irish national daily, said Assange had been "relentlessly targeted." It noted that Hillary Clinton had contributed to this process, because "Assange highlighted the Clintons' links with Saudi Arabia and the multimillion donations that kingdom made to their foundation, after she, as secretary of state, sanctioned an \$80 billion Saudi arms deal."

The editorial concluded: "Assange remains, despite illegal efforts to revoke it, an Australian citizen, but he has not enjoyed the support a person who has not been charged with anything, much less convicted of anything, might expect from a democracy.

"These are indeed murky waters, but Assange's ordeal reconfirms a truth: News is something someone, somewhere, does not want published. That's why he is such a threat."

Writing in *Daily Review*, an Australian news website that covers arts and entertainment, journalist Helen Razer explained: "Julian Assange is not a criminal. Julian Assange is a journalist. Julian Assange is an Australian who has been, in the judgement of the United Nations, arbitrarily detained for six years."

Criticising journalists who have lined up against Assange, Razer concluded: "And if you've found a way to celebrate, excuse or explain this to yourself,

perhaps you have what it takes to serve the delusions of Australian journalism."

The Trump administration's operation against WikiLeaks and Assange escalated this week when the FBI laid 13 espionage and related charges against an alleged whistleblower, a former CIA software engineer, who has been accused of leaking an archive of the spy agency's secrets to WikiLeaks in 2017.

Joshua Adam Schulte, 29, was originally arrested last August, then released and rearrested in December. In March last year, under the codename "Vault 7," WikiLeaks published CIA files, exposing the lengths to which the agency goes to hack phones, computers, smart TVs and GPS systems, turning them into surveillance devices.

Schulte faces up to 135 years in prison if found guilty—an indication of the fate that the US government intends for Assange. "Schulte utterly betrayed this nation and downright violated his victims," FBI official William Sweeney Jr. said in a highly prejudicial statement.

This development underscores the necessity to deepen and extend the fight throughout the international working class for Assange's freedom and the defence of fundamental democratic rights.



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