

The Australian Labor Party and the persecution of Julian Assange

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The Australian Labor Party is holding its national conference starting this weekend, at which it will be touting itself as the alternative to the current Liberal-National Party Coalition government headed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Under a section headlined “Assisting Australians abroad,” Labor’s draft program asserts: “Australia should protect the safety of Australians overseas. Labor will deliver a high standard of travel advice and consular assistance to all Australians overseas.”

It continues: “To the extent receiving governments permit, Labor will ensure consular representatives promptly visit Australians who have been arrested and maintain effective communication between legal representatives and the families of those who have been detained.”

These words are exposed as shameless hypocrisy by Labor’s refusal, for over eight years, to do anything to defend Australian citizen and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

Labor held government when, in 2010, Assange made available a vast amount of information that exposed the scale of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well the sordid diplomatic intrigues and conspiracies conducted by American embassies and consulates around the globe.

In response, the Obama administration and US intelligence agencies launched a vicious vendetta to destroy WikiLeaks and condemn Assange to a prison cell, or worse.

Far from protecting the “safety” of an Australian overseas, the Labor government lined up completely with Washington and placed itself at the forefront of the attack on Assange, WikiLeaks and freedom of speech.

On November 29, 2010, Labor’s Attorney-General

Robert McClelland stated: “We think there are potentially a number of criminal laws that could have been breached by the release of this information.”

On December 2, 2010, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard stated: “I absolutely condemn the placement of this information on the WikiLeaks website. It’s a grossly irresponsible thing to do, and an illegal thing to do.”

On December 4, 2010, McClelland declared that Labor was investigating whether it could strip Assange of his Australian passport.

The Labor government maintained its total hostility toward Assange even after the Australian Federal Police stated categorically that the journalist and editor had not breached any Australian law and WikiLeaks’ actions were those of a bona fide media organisation.

Labor refused to condemn, as a frame-up, the outrageous and false allegations that Assange may have committed sexual assault and to denounce the arrest warrant issued by a Swedish prosecutor.

The abandonment of an Australian citizen by Labor aided and abetted the British courts, which ignored the evidence that the sole motive behind the allegations was to engineer Assange’s imprisonment in Sweden while American authorities organised his extradition to the US to face a show trial on espionage-related charges.

At no point did the Labor government demand that Britain and Sweden stop the persecution of Assange and allow him to immediately leave the United Kingdom and return to Australia if he chose to do so.

Ultimately, Labor’s refusal to uphold the obligation of the Australian government to protect its citizen, and the gross miscarriage of justice committed in the British courts, forced Assange to seek political asylum in Ecuador’s small embassy in London on June 19,

2012.

Labor's position flows inexorably from its total support for the US-Australia military alliance and its backing for every crime and intrigue committed by US imperialism. The government fully aligned Australia in November 2011 with the US "pivot to Asia" and its plans for a strategic and ultimately military confrontation with China. It sanctioned the expansion of the major US weapons-targeting base at Pine Gap, the basing of US Marines in Darwin and the US military's increased use of Australian ports and airbases.

Labor stepped up Australia's role in the US-led "Five Eyes" global spying network which, as Edward Snowden exposed in 2015, systematically violates the democratic rights of hundreds of millions of people, monitoring their communications and online activities.

Since it was thrown out of office in 2013, Labor has loyally served US and Australian imperialist interests from the opposition benches. It has insisted that the Coalition government maintain and extend Australia's alignment with the US preparations for war with China. In June, it partnered with the Coalition to ram through sweeping "foreign interference" laws that seek to criminalise opposition to the militarist agenda of both major parties.

In regard to WikiLeaks, Labor ensured no support has been offered to Assange as he has endured years of effective imprisonment in the Ecuadorian embassy, denied sunlight and medical care and threatened with US charges. It has blocked his defence, including by having the trade unions repudiate their token expressions of concern, in 2010 and 2011, over his persecution.

When the new Ecuadorian government turned against Assange and vindictively cut off all his communications in March this year, Labor predictably did and said nothing about the treatment of an Australian journalist.

Every Labor member of parliament, both federal and state, has ignored the demand made by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), journalist John Pilger, Assange's family and numerous leading lawyers and journalists that the Australian government immediately intervene to secure Assange's freedom.

Ahead of the next Australian election, due by next May, Labor has attempted to present itself as more

"progressive" than the Coalition parties. Its leader Bill Shorten even makes occasional populist noises over social inequality and the financial stress facing millions of people.

The truth, however, is that the Labor Party is a right-wing, imperialist organisation. Its hostility to Assange and WikiLeaks is the logical corollary of its conscious policy of defending the capitalist profit system by shattering the social and democratic rights of the working class.

On Sunday, December 16, the SEP will hold a public meeting in Sydney, livestreamed around the world via Facebook, to outline and discuss the next stage in the campaign to secure the unconditional freedom of Assange, including his right to return to Australia if he so chooses, with a guarantee of protection from any extradition to the US. We urge all workers, youth and professionals who genuinely defend democratic rights to participate.

The author also recommends:

SEP meeting and livestream on December 16: What next in the fight to free Julian Assange?



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