

Australian media union complicit in the persecution of Julian Assange

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Amid growing calls for the freedom of Julian Assange, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which claims to be the peak union representing Australian journalists and media employees, has maintained a stoney silence on the persecution of the WikiLeaks founder and Australian citizen.

The union's refusal to even mention Assange's plight is all the more damning, given the growing support among independent journalists and principled defenders of democratic rights for Assange.

The rallies called by the Socialist Equality Party in March, to demand that the Australian government end its collaboration with the US-led vendetta against the WikiLeaks founder, have been endorsed by world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger, Pulitzer Prize-winning US journalist Chris Hedges, prominent human rights activist Professor Stuart Rees, acclaimed artist Roger Waters, the editors-in-chief of Disobedient Media and Consortium News, and Terry Hicks, the father of former Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks.

These individuals have issued statements, or spoken alongside SEP national secretary James Cogan, noting that the attempts by the US and its allies to railroad Assange to prison are the spearhead of a broader campaign by governments to abrogate press freedom. The WikiLeaks founder is being persecuted for his role in the exposure of US war crimes, illegal diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance of the population.

He has been subjected to arbitrary detention in Ecuador's London embassy, enforced by the British government's threats to arrest him on trumped-up bail charges, for almost seven years. If Assange leaves the building, he will be arrested and subjected to extradition proceedings to the US, where he likely faces charges for WikiLeaks' publishing activities carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment or the death penalty.

The MEAA is well aware that governments and the

ruling elites they represent are engaged in a frontal assault on the rights of journalists and publishers. Last year, the union launched an online campaign in defence of journalists and freedom of the press.

In a statement, the union declared: "Press freedom allows journalists to scrutinise and report accurately on governments, big corporations and the powerful in our society." It warned that the Australian government had introduced legislation, including laws targeting email encryption, "that threaten to restrict press freedom, constrain the way journalists work, and muzzle legitimate news stories from becoming public."

The MEAA declared: "Around the world, our colleagues face government intimidation, restrictions on free speech, arrests and violence, and even death as they go about their jobs of exposing corruption, injustice and abuses of power." It noted: "Australian journalists working overseas are not immune from these attacks."

But the statement did not mention the most prominent Australian journalist and publisher who is being illegally detained and threatened for "exposing corruption, injustice and abuses of power": Julian Assange.

This makes plain that the MEAA's claims to be leading a campaign for democratic rights and press freedom are fraudulent. The union claims to defend journalists, but only those who have not fallen afoul of the US and Australian governments and the major media conglomerates with which it collaborates.

The MEAA's own statements, in 2010 and 2011, are an indictment of its refusal ever since to defend Assange.

At the time, as US war logs and diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks were being syndicated by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *New York Times* and other major publications, the union warned that the attempts by the US state to silence Assange and WikiLeaks were a major attack on press freedom.

In December 2010, the MEAA publicly presented one

of Assange's Australian legal representatives with a lifetime membership card for the WikiLeaks founder.

MEAA Victorian branch secretary Louise Connor told the event that WikiLeaks was "an online publisher representing the new media which is working with at least six other media groups to bring these cables to light so that the public can be kept informed."

Connor continued: "Attempts to muzzle the media, whether it is new media like WikiLeaks or old media like the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* or Australia's Fairfax newspapers, cannot be tolerated if we are to lay claim to having a strong, functioning and enduring democracy."

Ged Kearney, then president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, who was also present declared: "WikiLeaks has broken no Australian law, and as an Australian citizen, Julian Assange should be supported by the Australian government, not prematurely convicted." At the time, the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard was publicly branding WikiLeaks as a criminal organisation and pledging to support the US efforts to destroy it.

The following year, in 2011, the MEAA publicly welcomed the decision to award Assange a Walkley Award for "most outstanding contribution to journalism," the preeminent media award in Australia.

Since then, the union has said virtually nothing about Assange. The last mention of the WikiLeaks founder on its website was a passing reference in 2015, which did not defend him or even note the ongoing attacks that he faced.

What has changed? Clearly, the dangers confronting Assange have not lessened. Now, more than ever before, he faces the imminent prospect of being bundled into US custody and prosecuted for WikiLeaks' publishing activities. His health, moreover, after almost seven years of detention, is in a perilous state.

All of the pretexts concocted by governments and their intelligence agencies to persecute Assange have been exposed as lies. The Swedish investigation into supposed sexual misconduct was dropped in 2017, in a tacit admission that it was a frame-up from the start.

The attacks against Assange and WikiLeaks are clearly revealed as an attempt to abolish freedom of the press, and illegalise media organisations that expose government crimes.

The MEAA's refusal to defend Assange parallels the abandonment of the WikiLeaks founder by an entire milieu comprised of the unions, the Greens, the pseudo-left and civil liberties organisations. Virtually all of them

either turned against Assange or adopted a complete silence on his plight, following 2011.

This can only be understood as a class response. These organisations, speaking for affluent layers of the upper middle-class, watched the eruption of revolutionary working class struggles in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, provoked in part by WikiLeaks publications, with fear and horror.

Exposures of war crimes overseen by the right-wing governments of George Bush in the US and John Howard in Australia were one thing.

The ongoing publication of diplomatic cables and government documents revealing the daily criminality of official politics, and acting as the catalyst for the entry of masses of workers and youth into struggle, was quite another. The representatives of the upper middle-class saw this as an existential threat to the social order, upon which their wealth and privileges are based.

All of the organisations that abandoned Assange have also dispensed with whatever nominal opposition to imperialist war they once professed. In Australia, the Greens, the unions and the pseudo-left have explicitly or tacitly backed Australia's integration into a vast US military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific region, in preparation for war with China.

WikiLeaks' ongoing exposures of imperialist war and militarism cut across their alignment with the war drive of their "own" government.

The dramatic shift to the right by many from this upper-middle-class milieu makes clear that the defence of democratic rights requires the development of a political movement of workers, students and young people in defence of Julian Assange and freedom of the press.

As the working class is propelled into mass social struggles, the demands for press freedom and an end to internet censorship will be inscribed on its banner.

Journalists and media employees should defy the union, call rank-and-file meetings and pass resolutions endorsing the Socialist Equality Party rallies demanding freedom for Assange, in Sydney on March 3 at 2 p.m. at the Martin Place Amphitheatre, and in Melbourne on March 10, at 1 p.m. on the steps of the Victorian State Library in Swanston Street.



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