

Opening remarks to March 3 Sydney rally by Socialist Equality Party leader, Linda Tenenbaum

Hundreds defy slanders, lies and media censorship to demand freedom for Julian Assange

Linda Tenenbaum
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The aim of this rally, which is being live-streamed around the world, and of our March 10 rally in Melbourne, is to continue and broaden the fight we have been waging, over the past nearly nine years, to free courageous publisher and Australian citizen, Julian Assange.

Assange is a journalist who has put his life on the line to tell the truth to the world: to lift the veil of lies and deception and expose the violence, conspiracies and crimes committed by the US government and its allies, including Australia, above all, through their brutal and ongoing neo-colonial wars of the past nearly 30 years. Julian has been held for nearly seven years in what the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled was a “deprivation of liberty” and “violation” of his human rights.

For much of the past year, while holed up in a tiny room in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, barred from any physical or social contact with the outside world, he has been denied even the right to communicate via telephone or the internet. His health is deteriorating, and he faces the constant threat of extradition to the US, where he could face charges that, if found guilty, could attract the death penalty. Neither the Morrison government nor any of the establishment parties has lifted a finger in his defence.

By attending this rally, you have already taken a significant stand against the campaign of lies and slanders concocted to vilify Assange and blacken his name, along with the wall of political and media censorship, throughout Australia and around the world, that has been erected to deepen the isolation of Assange from his many millions of supporters, and prevent him from continuing his vital work.

Almost nine months ago, the SEP’s first rally to free Julian Assange demanded of the then Turnbull government that it exercise its diplomatic powers and indisputable legal

discretion to secure the release of Julian Assange and bring him home.

Turnbull and his government did nothing, confident that not a single media outlet, or parliamentarian would raise a word. So today, we are demanding of the Australian government, now the new Morrison government: Insist that the British government allow Julian to leave the embassy as a free man, travel to the airport and, if he so wishes, board a plane to Australia, with a transparent guarantee against both arrest in the UK and extradition to the US!

Julian has never been charged with a crime; he has an Australian passport; he is an Australian citizen and, as such, the Morrison government is obligated to defend his democratic rights and to act to protect him from harm.

There are notable precedents.

David Hicks, for example, was arrested in Afghanistan in 2001 by US forces, falsely deemed a terrorist, then incarcerated in Guantánamo Bay for five years, where he was subjected to torture and solitary confinement. His father, Terry Hicks, conducted a powerful campaign to mobilize David’s many, many supporters across the country, and in the US, who were outraged at his treatment and the Howard government’s filthy collaboration with Washington. It was this pressure from below that eventually forced David’s release, just prior to the 2007 election. His conviction on terror charges at a Guantánamo Bay show trial was later formally rescinded.

Terry Hicks has written an endorsement of this rally, drawing important lessons from his own traumatic experience. He writes: “If Julian was a famous sports person and the government thought they could use him to promote their own international image, they would be bending over backwards to secure his release. But because they can’t use

him this way and they follow whatever the US demands, they refuse to act...

Terry continues: "You might get support from high profile people, but the fight to gain Julian's freedom depends on ordinary people speaking out. You will win them if you explain the basic issues at stake, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and democratic rights, and you'll be respected for your determination and your honesty.

"Always remember that the story constantly alters for those who lie, but if you're telling the truth then nothing changes, and the real story will eventually come out.

He concludes: "The Australian people have got to take a stand in defence of Julian Assange and understand that when they take up the struggle for his freedom, they are fighting to defend their own democratic rights."

Peter Greste, the Australian Al Jazeera journalist, was jailed in Egypt in December 2013 and charged with "falsifying news and having a negative impact on overseas perceptions of the country" for exposing the Egyptian government's violence and human rights abuses, and convicted to seven years. But he was freed after immense pressure was placed on Canberra by his family, his supporters and hundreds of thousands of ordinary people, joined by the media, before the government finally acted.

The most recent case is that of Hakeem al-Araibi, a Bahraini-born refugee, Australian resident and footballer, recently imprisoned in Thailand after Bahrain sought his extradition, placing his life in danger. A powerful, broad-based campaign was launched, led by well-known retired footballer, now TV sports commentator, Craig Foster, to force the government to secure al-Araibi's release from Thailand. The media enthusiastically participated, as did sporting groups, NGOs, trade unions, the state and federal governments, along with hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in Australia, Thailand and internationally. Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne was forced, eventually, to intervene. Bahrain dropped its extradition attempt and al-Araibi flew back to Australia three weeks ago.

Were the media, the unions, Labour, the Greens, the "civil rights" advocates, human rights groups and individual journalists, to play a similar role in the case of Julian Assange, discovering courage; raising their voices; refusing to be silenced; moving parliamentary motions; campaigning among, clarifying and fighting to engage ordinary people; not to speak of informing their readers of this rally; the weak, divided, reactionary and likely short-lived Morrison government would have been politically forced to meet its obligations to Assange and secure his release. Instead, there is total silence, blanket censorship. The voices of ordinary citizens have been muzzled. And the reason is clear: Julian Assange constitutes a threat, not only to the Australian

government but to every government. He has bravely published what they daily cover up, including their crimes, corruption and deceit, in order to remain in power.

The critical issue is: what is to be done? We appeal to everyone here to turn to the youth, the working class, and to all those who stand for the defence of fundamental democratic rights. We must all deepen and broaden the fight to clarify the significance of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, the work they have done and the exposures they continue to make. We must discuss, educate, inform and explain that the fight to free Julian Assange and defend WikiLeaks is essential to the fight to defend the democratic and social rights of the entire working class.

I would like to conclude by extending our warmest thanks to all of you for participating in this powerful event. Please remember that the SEP will be holding another rally next Sunday, March 10, in Melbourne, on the steps of the Public Library in Swanston Street. At the conclusion of that rally we will hand the baton to our counterparts in London, who will be starting a vigil, organised by the Julian Assange Defence Committee, just as our rally ends.

Emmy Butlin, a spokeswoman for the committee in London, said last week: "We cannot stand by and witness [Julian Assange's] ordeal unmoved. We are grateful for the rallies in his homeland and inspired by them, and we shall pick up the baton as they finish their action and we shall start a solidarity vigil outside the Ecuadorian Embassy on Sunday, March 10, between 3 and 5pm."

On behalf of everyone here I send greetings of solidarity and appreciation to the Julian Assange Defence Committee, to every fighter for democratic rights, social equality, peace and justice the world over, and, above all, to Julian Assange.



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