Growing popular support for Julian Assange in Australia

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There is mounting opposition among Australian workers, students and young people to the illegal arrest of Julian Assange by the British police last Thursday inside Ecuador's London embassy.

Tens of thousands have also registered their hostility to the attempts by the Trump administration to extradite the WikiLeaks founder and Australian citizen to the US, where he faces concocted charges over his lawful publishing activities.

Over the past week alone, more than an additional 75,000 people have signed a petition on *change.org* calling on the Australian government to intervene to secure Assange's safe passage to Australia and prevent his extradition to the US.

The petition, now signed by more than 112,000 people, warns that Assange "faces the prospect of extradition to the USA for publishing facts delivered to him as a journalist" and for "revealing systemic government corruption and war crimes."

The mass outpouring is an indictment of successive Australian governments. With the support of the entire political establishment, they have refused to defend Assange, instead participating in the US-led vendetta against him.

Since Assange's arrest, Liberal-National Coalition and Labor Party representatives have continued to flatly reject calls to intervene. Instead, they have made empty assurances that they will provide the WikiLeaks founder with unspecified "consular assistance," committing them to nothing.

Senior MPs from both parties have signalled their hostility to the journalist, with Coalition Senator James McGrath declaring he "felt sorry" for Ecuador over Assange's seven-year detention in the embassy. Labor deputy leader Tanya Plibersek shared a slanderous tweet which claimed that the WikiLeaks publisher had worked as "the agent of a proto fascist state, Russia, to undermine democracy" and branded his supporters as "cultists."

Millions of workers and young people reject these lies.

Brisbane worker Phillip Adams, who helped initiate the petition last July, told the WSWS this morning that over the past seven days it had grown from 35,000 signatures to more than 112,000. Adams, who is not affiliated to any political party, said the petition was receiving a new signature roughly every eight seconds.

"Since the arrest, this issue has resonated powerfully across the citizenship," Adams said. "There is a real grassroots support base for the petition." He added: "People across the spectrum want the torture of Assange ended, because it's off the scale."

Adams explained: "We always focussed the petition on the threat of extradition to the US. That has now been vindicated. Beforehand, the government and others denied that there was an extradition plan. They said it was in the realm of conspiracy theory."

Adams said no parliamentary politician could claim not to know about the petition because each had received individual emails about it. Once the petition had got to 30,000 signatures, efforts were made to table it in the Australian Senate during February but that was blocked, supposedly due to lack of time.

"Now this is front and centre," Adams said. "This is the demand of the people."

Comments on the petition, accompanying the signatures, demonstrate the immense appreciation of working people for WikiLeaks' publications.

One, posted this morning, stated: "Assange has published the truth that enlightens all thinking people. He has done us a great service! He should not be punished for his service to the truth!"

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Another declared: “To extradite an Australian citizen to certain torture & possibly even death, for the ‘crime’ of being a journalist, sets a dangerous precedent for ALL journalists ALL over the world. We must protect this Nobel peace prize nominee and hero Julian Assange and protect the freedom of the press, otherwise we are devolving into authoritarianism.”

Others pointed to the responsibility of the Australian government. One petitioner wrote: “Julian Assange is an Australian citizen! As such the government has a legal and moral obligation to ensure the safety of its citizens and to protect them from injustice by other countries... independently of their deals with those countries!”

There also has been mass support for Assange in Europe and internationally. A petition demanding that the UK government not extradite Assange to the US has been signed by more than 267,000 people. Similar numbers have signed petitions in Germany.

Demonstrations have been held in Britain and France. A protest by up to 20,000 Ecuadorian workers and youth on Wednesday, condemning that country’s regime for illegally terminating Assange’s asylum, was brutally repressed by the police.

To suppress these sentiments and poison public opinion, the official media in Australia has, over the past week, alternated between slandering Assange and seeking to bury information about his dire plight.

Corporate publications, and television programs on the commercial networks and the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation, have adapted themselves to the Trump administration’s attempts to prosecute Assange on conspiracy and espionage charges, by falsely declaring that he is not a journalist and that WikiLeaks is not a media organisation.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday marked a rare breach in the media line-up. Suelette Dreyfus, who wrote a book in collaboration with Assange in the late 1990s, pointed to WikiLeaks’ unparalleled record of investigative journalism.

“Assange is both a journalist and a publisher; he has led fearless news reporting over more than a decade,” Dreyfus wrote. “His digital media outlet has worked like a wire service: it publishes straight, fact-based news pieces, supported by data sets of redacted original material.”

Dreyfus noted that other media organisations had “copied many innovations by Assange. These include installing anonymous digital drop boxes, publishing large redacted data sets in support of investigative news stories, hiring data science journalists, and encouraging reporters to improve their cybersecurity to protect sources.”

Significantly, she asked: “Why isn’t the Australian government using its special relationship with Britain to ask for its own citizen to be sent safely home? Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s throw-away lines about Assange’s case raises questions about whether he is a leader who will look after Australians in strife overseas. This is one of the roles of a government.”

Dreyfus similarly condemned the refusal of Labor leader Bill Shorten to take any action in defence of Assange.

Over the past 18 months, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has held a series of rallies, demanding that the Australian government use its undeniable diplomatic powers and legal discretion to secure Assange’s release from Britain and return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

The SEP has stressed that an Australian government will fulfil its responsibilities to the WikiLeaks founder only if it is compelled to do so by mass pressure from below. As part of its federal election campaign, the SEP will hold further rallies and public meetings to take forward this crucial fight.

To get involved, email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au

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