

UK's Julian Assange Defence Committee holds public meeting

Paul Mitchell
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Saturday saw the Julian Assange Defence Committee hold a public meeting, "Defend Julian Assange from US extradition," to "discuss and strategize grassroots solidarity for the WikiLeaks publisher."

Many ideas were discussed and agreed on how best to take forward the campaign to defend Assange and Chelsea Manning. Committee member Clara Campos described events since the solidarity vigil was set up outside the Ecuadorian Embassy in June 2012, when Assange was granted political asylum. She said it was necessary to develop the campaign now that Assange had been dispatched to Belmarsh prison. "It is more important than ever Mr. Assange is not extradited to the United States," she stressed.

Fellow committee member Emmy Butlin said Assange was a "political prisoner" who would be appearing on May 2 at Westminster magistrates court to face "the wrath of the US administration requesting his extradition."

"We want to continue the simple solidarity we have done over the years, but we want to open out the efforts to more people," she said.

"We have had many disappointments but not a single thing has dissuaded me from continuing. This has been a joy. Even someone like me or you, a simple person, can do something towards this struggle. We will continue. We have had a tremendous positive response."

Fidel Narváez, former consul at the Ecuadorian embassy, explained that he had been in daily contact with Assange and "the fact that you were there non-stop for so many years made him feel he was not alone. I feel what has happened with Ecuador is really a crime," he said.

Some supporters criticised the failure of the "labour movement" to come to the aid of Assange. One asked about the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), which had only recently issued a two-paragraph statement opposing the extradition of Assange, saying, "So far they have been absent." Another complained about the lack of coverage

in the *Morning Star*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Britain.

A third attendee, who was involved in the campaign for prisoners during the "Irish Troubles," added, "I think it is important that when people say, 'We support Julian Assange,' as [Labour leader Jeremy] Corbyn did at one point on Twitter and the NUJ has done 'in its own way,' we need to write to them, to picket them to say, 'What are you actually going to do then?'

"Verbal support will not cut it. Julian is up against the US state and the British government. Few of these people come out on demonstrations."

Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden welcomed the proposals being discussed to broaden the campaign in support of Assange. He told the Defence Committee, "You have the moral and political authority" to lead a campaign because "you have waged this struggle so consistently." He recounted how the committee had been "struggling for seven years," but said "the game has changed" with the attempts to extradite Julian Assange to the US.

"It will change the political situation," Marsden insisted. He took issue with a member of the audience who said that Assange's extradition was inevitable.

Assange faced two courts: "One is the official judicial system and the other is the court of public opinion. We will fight for the public's support."

There was an organised conspiracy to silence Assange and slander him, Marsden said. The *Guardian*, whose official position is to oppose extradition "because to do otherwise would discredit them for ever," is churning out columns that smear and denigrate him. The NUJ statement "is not only inadequate but an insult" to what Assange faces, he said to applause from the meeting.

Marsden pointed out Assange had "an extraordinarily good legal team," which was addressing "all the fundamental issues that are raised by his victimisation."

Further proof of the power of Assange's defence case, he said, is the April 14 statement by the secretary general of the Swedish Bar Association, Ms. Anne Ramberg, who accuses Sweden and Britain of a "deplorable legal handling."

Ramberg's statement was very important, given the huge campaign to change the agenda around Assange and resurrect the "rape" allegations, as the Blairites in the Labour Party had done.

Marsden quoted Ramberg, "The right to a fair trial within a reasonable time is established both in the Swedish legal system... and in the European Convention (Article 6). This legal right also applies during the preliminary investigation stage. To this has to be added the so-labelled presumption of innocence. It may well be questioned whether the result of the Swedish managing [of the case] was done in accordance with the principle of proportionality.

"I have previously stated that I find it remarkable that the Prosecutor did not implement the preliminary investigation forward at the pace and with the care one could have demanded. In this context, the courts have a very great responsibility.

"They could have put tougher demands on the prosecutor, to move the preliminary investigation forward. The conclusions that the prosecutor had as ground to dismiss the case [the pre-investigation], should also have been communicated considerably earlier than what happened. This leads to the conclusion that Sweden has a great responsibility for the situation that has arisen."

Ramberg concludes, "Let us not forget that whatever we may think of Assange or the deeds he is suspected of, this is about much more. It is about freedom of speech and the rule of law principles. It is ultimately about the right and the moral obligation to expose war crimes. Assange and WikiLeaks did it. The revelations about US abuse were necessary and particularly important. Should we extradite to Germany's Hitler someone who has revealed the existence of concentration camps and genocide, regardless to how that information was obtained? I don't think so."

Marsden also referred to Assange's former associate, Daniel Domscheit-Berg, who had recently pointed out, when requesting his testimony, that "Only one day after writing the indictment specifying that Assange faces charges of up to five years, the US Attorney's Office in a letter outlining the conditions for Domscheit-Berg to testify, admitted it was also investigating Assange for the 'unauthorized receipt and dissemination of secret information.'

"This accusation can be charged under the Espionage Act of 1917, intended to protect military secrets which has also been used to charge Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. Convictions under the Espionage Act can be punished by death."

Marsden declared, "Things are changing. We can proceed with a great deal of confidence. Millions are concerned about freedom of speech, censorship, democratic rights. Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning represent the opposition to these attacks and will be defended for that reason.

"There is a groundswell in Britain and internationally. You can see the number of people coming forward because of the gravity of the situation. The victimisation of Assange is the first great crime of the 21st century. If they are allowed to get away with it then everyone will suffer.

"The ability of an ordinary person in Australia to get 120,000 signatories to a pro-Assange petition is an indictment of organisations that should be able to mobilise thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands and haven't.

"We can change that. Not because we have confidence in the system but because there are millions of working people all over the world who look to Assange as someone who should be defended, who is a heroic figure who has been slandered from pillar to post. Those lies can be exposed, are being exposed. In doing so, we can change the political climate in favour of justice and freedom for Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning." Their victimisation was a fundamental assault "on the democratic rights of the British, European and international working class."

Marsden appealed to everyone to attend the SEP public meeting demanding freedom for Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning taking place in London on May 12 at the YMCA Indian Student Hostel.



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