

Protesters oppose US extradition proceedings against Julian Assange

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange yesterday strongly opposed the attempt by the US government to extradite him from the UK, appearing at Westminster Magistrates Court in London by video link from Belmarsh prison.

Assange told the courtroom: “I do not wish to surrender myself for extradition for doing journalism that has won many awards and protected many people.”

Judge Michael Snow arrogantly retorted: “I’ll take that as a decline.”

Outside, more than 100 people held a lively demonstration. They included supporters of the Julian Assange Defence Committee, which maintained a vigil outside London’s Ecuadorian embassy for seven years, and members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

The previous day, in a show trial at Southwark Crown Court, Assange was sentenced to 50 weeks in prison—just two weeks short of the maximum enforceable—for breaching bail conditions. His supposed crime was to seek political asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy seven years ago to avoid extradition to the US.

Assange has been held in Belmarsh, known as the “British Guantanamo,” since his illegal seizure and arrest at the Ecuadorian embassy on April 11.

Just three weeks ago, Judge Snow notoriously attacked Assange as a “narcissist” in the process of finding him guilty of a bail violation immediately after being arrested. With Assange justifiably fearing for his life, after senior US politicians went on record saying they favoured him being put to death, Snow said callously that Assange should “get over to the US” and “get on with your life.”

Yesterday, Snow said the “extradition process will take many months.” Attempting to play down the magnitude of the moves to extradite Assange, he added: “There will be another merely procedural hearing on May 30, where I suspect even less will happen.”

A more substantive hearing would take place on June 12, the date by which the US must provide the UK courts with all necessary documents for Assange’s extradition.

The British Conservative government and the judiciary are doing everything possible to facilitate the extradition of a heroic journalist who has been found guilty of nothing more than a bail offence.

Yesterday’s hearing only lasted 10 minutes. Ben Brandon, counsel for the US government, revealed why Washington deemed it imperative that Assange be extradited. He claimed that Assange assisted US whistleblower Chelsea Manning in accessing a code that allowed access to a “vast amount of classified documents” that she then passed to WikiLeaks.

Brandon said these included around 90,000 Afghan war-related reports, 400,000 Iraq war-related reports, 800 Guantanamo Bay detainee assessments and 250,000 US State Department cables. He alleged that Assange “actively tried to crack the password (to the classified computer) and encouraged Ms Manning to provide more information.”

Manning also remains in jail after being arrested on March 8. A US federal appeals court on April 22 rejected her request to be released on bail. The court upheld a contempt order against Manning for refusing to testify before a grand jury impanelled to bring charges against Assange.

To expedite Assange’s railroading, everything is being done to exclude public criticism of the criminal actions of Britain’s political and judicial establishment.

Yesterday’s hearing was held in Westminster’s tiny Court 3. Dozens of Assange’s supporters and other members of the public, some queuing for hours, were denied entry. Only the official media had access to the proceedings. People tried to take photos and videos of others being denied entry, but were instructed to immediately delete the files.

When people demanded access to find out how Assange was being treated, a court official blocking the door told them: “You can find out about what happened from the media in there.” So small was the courtroom, for a case involving the most important political prisoner on the planet, that even some of those allowed in were forced to stand or sit on the floor.

Emmy Butlin, from the Julian Assange Defence Committee, was among those who tried to enter the court. She told protesters outside: “More and more this appears a secret process in a secret court. We must resist!”

The removal of Assange to the US is critical to the plans of the major imperialist powers to silence WikiLeaks for its devastating exposure of their myriad war crimes and attacks on the democratic rights of the world’s population.

Those demonstrating outside included dozens of Yellow Vest protesters who attended from various towns and cities in France, after having participated in May Day rallies the previous day in Paris and other locations.

Along with British workers and youth, others had flown in from Denmark and Spain to show their support. The gratitude felt by millions of people for the brave work of Assange and WikiLeaks was evident as the international gathering chanted slogans in English, French and Spanish.

Among these were “Thank you WikiLeaks,” “Merci WikiLeaks,” “Gracias WikiLeaks,” “Liberté, Julian Assange,” “There’s only one decision, No Extradition!” “Free speech, Free Assange” and “US, UK, Hands off Assange!” Among the most powerful chants was the call: “American people—Defend Julian Assange.”

After the hearing, protesters occupied for a short period the busy Marylebone Road directly outside the court.

Speaking to the media after the hearing, WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson stated: “The fight has just begun. It will be a long one and a hard one.” Assange was being held in “appalling” conditions at Belmarsh prison, confined to his cell 23 hours a day, in “what we call in general terms solitary confinement.”

Hrafnsson told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Today, the US government was granted until the end of this month to bring additional information. So we will know what cards they will put on the table on top of the ridiculous allegation stemming from the documents already presented.

“I say ridiculous because the charges being laid by the US is a description of normal journalistic activity. Even though the Justice Department in the US put the word hacking on their press release, there was no hacking done.

It’s an absurdity that on World Press Freedom Day tomorrow, we should have Julian Assange sitting in Belmarsh prison.

“Today in the UK, all the headlines are about [Defence Secretary] Gavin Williamson being fired for leaking. There is a lot of discussion about whether he is a leaker, what his motive was, etc. That is none of my concern. But what one found striking today was that there was no questioning of the fundamental right of the *Daily Telegraph* to publish this information.

“Nobody doubts that. Nobody doubts the validity of a media organisation publishing information, even though people may question the motive of the person that leaked it. Why aren’t people demanding that the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* joins Julian Assange in Belmarsh?”

Regarding how Assange’s continued arbitrary detention was impacting on WikiLeaks’ work, Hrafnsson said: “Our primary focus these days is of course the fight for freedom of our publisher, but the work will continue.”

A member of Assange’s legal team, Jennifer Robinson, made a fresh appeal for the Australian government to intervene in the case to protect the Australian citizen. “What we would like to see is action at the higher political levels and diplomatic protection being exercised over Julian Assange,” she told AAP.

“We have been asking the Australian government since 2010 to seek assurances to protect him from US extradition, the very matter that he’s facing right now and we would like the Australian government to be raising his case.”

The freedom of Assange and Manning must be secured by a mass movement of workers and youth internationally. Protests must be organised around the globe by all those concerned with the defence of the fundamental democratic rights.



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