Berlin: Meeting held at Humboldt University to defend Julian Assange

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, several dozen students and workers gathered at Humboldt University in Berlin to protest the persecution of Julian Assange and discuss the political and historical background to the attack on the courageous journalist. The meeting was convened by the University Group of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

Christoph Vandreier, deputy chairman of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), introduced the event with an in-depth contribution, which was eagerly followed by the audience. He began by detailing the crimes WikiLeaks had revealed since its founding in 2006.

They range from evidence of torture in Guantanamo, to the uncovering of massive tax evasion by the super-rich and illegal surveillance measures, to comprehensive leaks of the war crimes of the NATO states in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the Iraq war alone, WikiLeaks had evidenced 15,000 civilian killings previously hushed up by the US military. There were also countless details exposed about the army's brutal actions against men, women and children.

"These revelations not only revealed the brutal nature of these colonial wars," Vandreier said, "but also exposed the so-called journalists who first spread the lie about alleged 'weapons of mass destruction' to justify the war, and then glorified it as a liberation with their 'embedded journalism.'" He added that the same hacks were now attacking Assange.

As a result of these revelations, the US Department of Defense had already stated in 2008 that WikiLeaks had to be discredited and its protagonists jailed. Consequently, the Wikileaks servers were attacked and blocked, the web address withdrawn and numerous ways to make donations cut off, Vandreier said.

The ruling elites had been particularly aggressive in their pursuit of Assange. Vandreier detailed how long-completed investigations were resumed because of alleged sexual offences in Sweden in order to create a pretext for his onward extradition to the United States. Even the United Nations Human Rights Council has stated that Assange was "arbitrarily deprived of his freedom for a disproportionately long time."

Now he has been arrested under new pretexts and is threatened with extradition to the US, where, in secret, further charges under the espionage act are being prepared against him, which are punishable by death.

"If Assange were delivered up to the US, that would not be a legal transfer, but an illegal rendition. He would not face a fair trial in the US, but a show trial, whose verdict is already fixed," Vandreier said, summing up the threat to Assange. "If that comes about, it means the end of press freedom and basic democratic rights. It would be directed against all those who oppose illegal wars, mass surveillance and the enrichment of the super-rich."

Even more striking was the smear campaign now being conducted in the media against Assange, ranging from resurrecting the rape allegations, accusations of being a Russian agent, to ridiculing his physical condition after his ordeal at the Ecuadorian embassy. Vandreier also named many German media outlets which had either expressed their pleasure at Assange's arrest or legitimized it.

This showed there was no basis for the defence of democratic rights in the ruling elite, but the encouragement of authoritarian and fascist tendencies. This development should be taken very seriously, Vandreier explained, underlining this with the historical example of Carl von Ossietzky. The journalist had been imprisoned in the Weimar Republic for "betrayal of secrets" because he had uncovered the illegal

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rearmament of the Reichswehr [Imperial Army]. Two months after his release in December 1932, he was again imprisoned by the Nazis and taken to a concentration camp, where he was tortured and mistreated.

"Today, the actions against Assange show that those in power are heading back in the same direction," Vandreier said, adding that this was also happening at Humboldt University, where militarists like Herfried Münkler and right-wing professor Jörg Baberowski were teaching and were protected by the university management against any criticism.

The shift to the right this expressed, and the campaign against Assange, was a fundamental international development, Vandreier said. In the US, Trump's administration was increasingly taking on openly fascistic forms, and in Europe, far-right parties were already involved in government in 10 countries. The reason for this lies in the deep crisis of capitalism, which, as in the 20th century, leads to fascism and war, Vandreier explained.

He concluded saying, "The only way to defend Assange and democratic rights is to mobilize the international working class on the basis of a socialist programme. That is the only social force that can oppose the campaign of the ruling elites."

Following Vandreier's contribution, a lively discussion developed, focusing primarily on this perspective and the significance of a Marxist understanding and socialist programme. At the conclusion of the meeting, the following resolution was unanimously approved by those present:

"This meeting at Humboldt University Berlin condemns the arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. We demand the immediate and unconditional release of Assange, the whistle-blower Chelsea Manning and all the brave journalists who have revealed the extent of the brutal wars and crimes of those in power. We agree to support the international struggle for the freedom of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning with all our strength!"

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