

Assange's father tells demonstrators Australian government must secure son's release

Our reporter
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Last Friday, protestors in Sydney were addressed by John Shipton, Julian Assange's father, Socialist Equality Party election candidate Oscar Grenfell, barrister Greg Barns and other speakers. Shipton insisted that the Australian government immediately secure the release of the WikiLeaks publisher, journalist and Australian citizen.

The Sydney demonstration, outside the US embassy in Martin Place and then the nearby Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade building, was held two days after Assange was sentenced in a British court to 50 weeks jail on bogus bail violation charges.

It was organised by the Support Assange and WikiLeaks Coalition, and was one of a number of protests around the world defending Assange on World Press Freedom Day.

John Shipton, Assange's biological father, told protestors that Ecuador had "sold" his son in exchange for a multi-billion dollar International Monetary Fund loan. Julian was being persecuted, he said, for exposing the "grand narrative of every heinous crime" committed by the US and other countries.

"The consequence of WikiLeaks revealing these crimes, the destruction of Iraq, the destruction of Afghanistan, the destruction of Syria, the destruction of Libya, millions killed, is they want their vindictive revenge," Shipton said.

Assange's father described his son's jailing as "an outrage" and called on the government to intervene and secure his release. "Australia, we [must] work together to bring Julian home to his family, to his children and to give the Australian government the courage to stop assisting this by doing nothing."

Oscar Grenfell, the Socialist Equality Party's federal election candidate in Parramatta, said the defence of Assange was a decisive political question for the working class.

What is being prepared, he said, "is an extraordinary rendition operation, with a pseudo-judicial fig-leaf which will set a precedent for the abolition of freedom of the press. This is aimed at sending a clear message to the working class: if you take social and political action that challenges the powers that be, you will face state repression."

Grenfell said these anti-democratic attacks were made possible because of the complicity of successive Australian governments. "Beginning with the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard, every Australian government has participated in the US-led vendetta against Assange. They have refused to defend a persecuted journalist and Australian citizen.

"It's not just the major parties. None of the other parties are raising the defence of Julian as a central issue in this election. By their active support for the attacks against him, or their silent complicity, the parliamentary parties are signalling that they are pro-imperialist organisations, committed to US wars and to the repression of those who expose them. The Australian media has likewise played a shameful role."

Grenfell said it was necessary to mobilise the international working class which was now entering into major social and political struggles against austerity, war and authoritarianism.

"Assange is rightly viewed by millions of workers and young people as a hero," Grenfell added. "It's our task to forge these sentiments into a mass political movement that will compel the Australian government to use all its legal discretion and diplomatic powers to secure Assange's return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US."

Mary Kostakidis, a popular former Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television news presenter and journalist,

told the rally that society “owed a great debt” to people such as Assange, Chelsea Manning and others who are “prepared to risk their freedom and their lives so that important information can be made public.”

Kostakidis noted the escalating government attacks on freedom of the press, journalists and whistleblowers, and praised Assange for establishing WikiLeaks. “Digital technology has democratised the flow of information,” she said, and undermined the ability of the “traditional gatekeepers of information to decide what is appropriate and palatable for the public to see and hear.”

The battle today, she continued, “is for the public’s right to know in a 21st century communications environment. Governments are sending the message that if you publish our secrets, we’ll lock you up for life. You try to protect your sources and we will go after you.”

Kostakidis called on other journalists to defend Assange: “To my colleagues in the mainstream media: Don’t be distracted by inconsequential issues like the perceived personality issue. All this is to detract from the all-important issues at stake here...”

“If wrongdoing remains hidden and hidden in perpetuity then it weakens the press and its ability to hold the powerful to account. It sabotages our democracy.”

Lissa Johnson, a Sydney clinical psychologist who has written extensively in defence of Assange, told the rally that the psychology profession owes Assange “a huge debt of gratitude” over WikiLeaks’ publication of the Guantanamo Files in 2011.

This previously secret information, she said, exposed the collaboration of American Psychological Association members with the US army’s torture of prisoners at the notorious prison and at secret CIA sites around the world.

Johnson denounced the mainstream media for its attacks on Assange and for “the trivialising and sanitising of atrocity” and the “waging of psychological war on Julian Assange, with baseless, vicious smears.”

She referenced CIA director Mike Pompeo’s threat in 2017 to “take down” WikiLeaks and pursue with “great vigour” other “small media platforms.” This, Johnson said, was part of Washington’s war against all genuine reporting and free speech.

Others addressing the rally included former Green Senator Scott Ludlum, Greg Barns, Assange’s chief Australian-based lawyer, and Paul Gregoire, a writer for *Sydney Criminal Lawyers* website.

Ludlum was a Greens Senator during Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s Labor-Greens’ minority government between 2010 and 2013. Gillard falsely claimed

WikiLeaks’s activities were “illegal” and endorsed Washington’s persecution of Assange. Ludlum and the Greens refused to break from the de facto coalition over Gillard’s outrageous attack.

Ludlum, who writes occasionally for the *Guardian*, has said little about Assange in the past two years. The former Greens Senator made some pro-forma comments about Assange’s imprisonment and possible extradition to the US and told protestors it would be a “long struggle.” He made no demands on the Australian government or the Labor Party and did not even mention the Greens.

Greg Barns referred to the mass protests which forced Canberra to secure the release of Australian citizen David Hicks who was subjected to extraordinary rendition by the US and illegally imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay between 2002 and 2007.

“If Assange is extradited from the UK, he will be taken to the United States in the same way that Hicks was, and subjected to torture and cruel and unusual punishment. The Australian government had an obligation to bring David Hicks back to Australia. It has an obligation to bring Julian Assange back to Australia,” Barns said.

“Whoever wins government on May 18, whether it be Morrison or Shorten, this matter will not go away. It needs to be dealt with as an urgent priority.... We will not be silenced.”

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