

Australia: GetUp's silence over the persecution of Julian Assange

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GetUp, the Australian-based online electoral pressure group, which previously defended WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange, has said nothing about his brutal April 11 arrest, imprisonment in the UK's Belmarsh jail and possible extradition to the US on frame-up charges.

In 2010–12, GetUp, which boasts over one million members, 70 fulltime staff and more than \$11 million in annual donations, actively opposed the US-led persecution of the Australian citizen.

The organisation called for Canberra to “stand up for the rights of citizens like Assange” and denounced American politicians and commentators calling for him to face the death penalty in the US or be assassinated.

GetUp also posted a video interview with Assange and his lawyer Jennifer Robinson, and collected thousands of dollars for full-page advertisements defending him in the Australian mainstream media and in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Seven years year later, GetUp has totally abandoned the Australian citizen. It has not issued a single statement about Assange's persecution, or uttered a word about its consequences for press freedom. And it refuses to explain why.

Repeated attempts by the *World Socialist Web Site* over the past two weeks to secure an explanation from GetUp's media liaison representatives—via phone, text messages and email—have come to nothing.

Questions about the last time GetUp issued an official statement in defence of Assange, and when and how the organisation decided not to condemn his arrest and imprisonment, have met a brick wall.

Assange's arrest last month exposed the degenerated character of the corporate media as hacks—from the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation through to the Murdoch tabloids, which howled their

agreement with the US-led operation against Assange. It also exposed the right-wing shift of so-called small “I” liberal organisations and a coterie of pseudo-left formations, who either joined the slander, and quietly complied, or said next to nothing.

GetUp's silence is not an accident or a temporary political mistake. The organisation was established in 2005 with the backing of sections of Australia's corporate and political elite, including Labor and the unions, concerned about growing popular disaffection with the two-party framework.

GetUp's initial directors included David Madden and Jeremy Heimans, consultants to the World Bank and United Nations, and McKinsey and Company, respectively. Former Australian Workers Union national secretary and current Labor Party leader Bill Shorten, as well as mining industry chiefs, were also on the board of this thoroughly bourgeois institution.

Capitalising on the popular anger against the big-business policies of the major parties, GetUp works to divert this opposition into safe political channels. Its *raison d'être* is to prop up the parliamentary order and bolster illusions in Labor and the Greens, claiming they represent a progressive alternative to the Liberal-National coalition.

GetUp insists that electoral protests and online lobbying against targeted election candidates will force Canberra to adopt socially equitable and environmentally friendly policies, defend basic democratic principles and the humane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers.

In the current federal election, GetUp is campaigning against Liberal-National coalition parliamentarians in 30 marginal electorates and says it will mobilise over 7,500 volunteers to hand out how-to-vote cards and other material on the May 18 polling day.

Growing numbers of people and journalists are speaking out against Assange's torturous solitary confinement in Belmarsh prison, the UK's Guantanamo. They recognise that he and US whistleblower Chelsea Manning, as well as freedom of the press, are in mortal danger.

Despite this popular outrage, GetUp will not be providing volunteers with any election material demanding freedom for Assange.

The organisation's refusal to challenge the lies and slander against Assange, or publicly raise the issue with any parliamentary politician, is a political blessing for the Liberal-National coalition, Labor, the Greens and other parliamentary parties running in the federal election.

These organisations all support the US-led operation to 'take down' Assange and WikiLeaks. Like their international counterparts, they are hostile to any public exposure of US-led war crimes and the anti-democratic operations of the state apparatus in preparation for imperialist war. They don't want any public discussion on this during the election.

GetUp's reaction to Assange's jailing also punctures the organisation's empty posturing about democratic rights and the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers. Assange, in fact, is the first Australian citizen to have sought asylum in a country other than his own, because consecutive Labor and Liberal-National governments refused to defend his basic rights. The blatant violation of Assange's right to asylum appears to be of little consequence to those running GetUp.

In politics, silence in the face of government attacks on basic rights signals complicity.

As Thomas Cromwell declares in Robert Bolt's *Man for All Seasons*: "Suppose I were to take a dagger from my sleeve and make to kill the prisoner with it; and my lordships there, instead of crying out for me to stop, maintained their silence... It would betoken a willingness that I should do it, and under the law, they will be guilty with me."

GetUp's refusal to speak out against the persecution of Assange speaks volumes about the class character of this organisation. It defends the existing political order and the preoccupations of the upper-middle class, and with them, is moving sharply to the right.

It also demonstrates that freedom of speech, the right to asylum and other democratic rights won in centuries

of political struggle requires the independent mobilisation of the international working class on a socialist perspective.

This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party, the only political party that has placed this political struggle at the centre of its federal election intervention. The fight to end the ongoing international conspiracy against, and persecution of, Assange and Manning, and secure their freedom is a class question and inseparable from the defence of the social and democratic rights of the international working class.

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