

London: Julian Assange Defence Committee lobbies Jeremy Corbyn's Constituency Labour Party

“This is not a time for fence-sitting”

Our reporters

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Members of the Julian Assange Defence Committee (JADC) lobbied Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's Islington North Constituency Labour Party (CLP) branch in London on Wednesday night. The JADC urged rank-and-file members to oppose US extradition proceedings against WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

Around 20 JADC members distributed an “Open Letter to Labour Party members” and a resolution appealing for support in the fight to free Assange.

The open letter explained: “Julian Assange is now languishing in Belmarsh high security prison, supposedly for skipping bail. But he is there for one reason and one reason only: he dared to expose the most hideous war crimes committed by US and UK occupation forces in their war for oil in Afghanistan and Iraq. For that single reason he has been pursued and persecuted with the intent of silencing and punishing him, and any others who dare follow his example.

“The new charges under the Espionage Act make this crystal clear. Any serious investigative journalism which reveals the true purposes and conduct of our rulers will be suppressed with an iron fist. Journalists can be locked up for life under a brutal regime of solitary confinement.

“The velvet glove that seeks to mask this iron fist are the bogus rape allegations—instigated not by the women but by the police in Sweden. Even the most cursory examination of Sweden's ‘preliminary investigations’ reveals a crude attempt at framing Assange. If extradited to Sweden, he will face onward-extradition

to the US under fast-track ‘temporary surrender’ provisions—which was the aim all along.”

Opposing efforts to smear and demonise Assange—led by Blairites such as Jess Phillips and Stella Creasy and Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry—the JADC's letter noted: “Whilst Jeremy Corbyn initially spoke up for Assange, he and his front bench team have since back-tracked, issuing statements that Assange should face Swedish extradition—even before an extradition request had been received! In face of the charges under the Espionage Act and Assange's continued ill-health and incarceration, they have remained utterly silent.”

The open letter appealed directly to Labour's rank-and-file: “This is not a time for fence sitting. Assange is a victim of a cruel and relentless state persecution. We ask you join with us in a single, unhesitant voice to demand his freedom from this torture. AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL! FREE JULIAN ASSANGE!”

On June 13, JADC members had written to Islington North's CLP asking to address their General Meeting and proposed a resolution in Assange's defence. No reply was received. At Wednesday night's lobby a person describing herself as the CLP's secretary said the JADC's resolution would not be moved at the meeting because “tonight is not the occasion.”

The response by Labour members to the JADC lobby was polarised. A vocal group of professionally attired women attacked Assange as a “rapist” and “narcissist.” Others reacted warmly. Derek, a Labour Party member for 40 years, spoke with JADC members and told the

WSWS, “I think now it’s become very clear that the only thing that this is about is extradition by the Americans—which Julian Assange always said it was about. It’s obvious that it’s a purely political prosecution.

“It’s a prosecution of Julian Assange because he revealed what goes on in the world and especially what America does. It’s an attack on free speech and it’s an attack on the press, and I wish that more of the press would realise that. I think we should do everything we can to make sure that he is not extradited to America. As an ordinary member of the party here that’s what I believe, and I’ll encourage everyone else in Islington North to hear what you’re saying.”

Another CLP member, Kate, thanked the JADC for being there and later emailed the following comments:

“We owe much to Assange/WikiLeaks for providing what is one of the most valuable and revealing collections of source material for journalists—of all time. It has been used to demand accountability for untold destruction and injustice wreaked by the most powerful countries in the ‘civilised’ world. Most memorable for many of us is the footage of US soldiers murdering unarmed, injured civilians in Iraq as though they were playing war games on an X-box. Our taxes helped to finance that war in which our politicians insisted we were the ‘saviours.’ WikiLeaks provided us with a terrifying wake-up call.

“We should be giving Assange unmitigated support, but many who would otherwise do so have reservations because his reputation has been criminalised. There is documented evidence that the US from 2008 were determined that this should happen.

“I don’t take rape lightly—I’ve been the victim of an attempted rape. Nor do I take lightly the extreme difficulties women face in trying to pursue rape cases. But nor do I take lightly the assumption of guilt without a trial. Or the documented interference in these particular rape allegations by the US. Or the fact that in 2016, the Swedish Court decided the evidence was too weak to pursue Assange and similarly have not pursued extradition since he left the Ecuadorian Embassy. Having seen the ‘evidence’ which colours the allegations—evidence ‘accepted’ by both sides according to court documents—it is not hard to understand why the case was not pursued. But it is not necessary for any of us to make a judgement call on the

rape allegations. If we have any respect for the law or the safeguards underpinning it, Assange is innocent of these accusations until proven guilty.

“Assange insisted that he sought refuge in an Embassy not to escape a trial in Sweden, but to escape extradition to the US on trumped-up charges. This concern—mocked at the time—has now proven to be well-founded. The ‘crime’ they want to punish him for is providing the means to hold seemingly unassailable power to account. Doing so is a vital component of a properly functioning democracy. His contribution has been immeasurable, as have been the risks he took in making it. We owe him unreserved support.”

According to CLP members, the open letter and draft resolution defending Assange were not mentioned during the course of the meeting. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn arrived after the lobby had disbanded. Yesterday, the *World Socialist Web Site* asked the Labour Party’s national press office and officials from Islington North CLP whether they were going to take action on the JADC resolution. An official from the CLP said he was unable to comment but promised to confirm their response within the next couple of days.

The JADC’s lobby put the Labour Party on notice that a major public campaign has begun, mobilising the independent political strength of the working class to free Julian Assange. This struggle will undoubtedly win the active support of all those who genuinely defend democratic rights. We urge Labour Party members to move resolutions in their ward and CLP branches demanding “no US extradition” and calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Julian Assange.



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