

Parti de l'égalité socialiste meeting in Paris demands freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporters
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On Sunday, the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), held a public meeting in Paris, calling to build a movement to free persecuted journalist Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The meeting was held three days after the publication of a June 20 statement by the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, calling for the formation of a Global Defense Committee to secure Assange's freedom.

One hundred people attended the Paris meeting. The PES distributed copies of the June 20 statement to everyone in the audience. They included participants in the ongoing "yellow vest" protests against social inequality and austerity, workers and student youth, and numerous participants in the fight for Assange's freedom. Several "yellow vest" protesters who had traveled to London in May to join protests against his arrest at the Ecuadorian embassy attended.

The meeting was an international event, addressed by leading members of the ICFI's national sections in Britain, Germany and France. Chris Marsden, the national secretary of the British Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Alex Lantier, the national secretary of the PES, were on the platform in Paris. Christoph Vandreier, the assistant national secretary of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP), addressed the meeting via video link from Berlin.

Marsden, who has played a leading role in the WSW's campaign against Assange's persecution by the British authorities in collusion with Washington, delivered the opening report, speaking on Assange and the perspective underlying the ICFI's call for a Global Defense Committee.

Marsden explained how British police's snatching of Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy in London and the laying of US charges against Assange carrying at least

175 years in jail place the journalist at the mercy of the war criminals he has done so much to expose. His jailing under appalling conditions in Belmarsh prison, facing rendition to the United States and potentially the death penalty comes amid a turn to authoritarian rule internationally. Marsden pointed to vicious police repression of French "yellow vest" protests, and German intelligence's blacklisting of the SGP as a "left extremist" organization.

Just as the ruling elite's assault on Assange is the focal point of its assault on democratic rights, Marsden added, "the international working class must make his defense the focal point for a counteroffensive against militarism and all attacks on democratic and social rights." He pointed to the 1972 workers struggles in Britain to liberate the class war prisoners of that era, and the mass mobilization of workers to free the Pentonville Five shop stewards jailed for picketing.

Marsden stressed that the ICFI sought to work with everyone, naturally excluding the political right, committed to the defense of democratic rights and building a popular mass movement to liberate Assange and Manning. Pointing to rallies for Assange held by the ICFI in Australia, Britain, and Sri Lanka, Marsden compared those now taking up the struggle to free Assange in France to those who fought to clear Alfred Dreyfus—the famous Jewish French army captain, unjustly disgraced and imprisoned in 1894 on charges of spying for Germany.

Christoph Vandreier spoke on the SGP's struggle against the legitimization of German militarism, neo-fascism and Hitler by far-right extremist professors like Jörg Baberowski. The blacklisting of the SGP and the recent assassination of Walter Lübke, amid clear signs of neo-fascist involvement, point to an escalating turn towards fascistic forms of rule that can only be combated through an international mobilization of the working class

on a socialist program.

Lantier spoke on the powerful appeal that an international struggle to free Assange could have, amid a global resurgence of strikes and protests like the “yellow vest” movement. He noted that Assange had directly appealed for asylum in France in 2015, only to be rejected by then-President François Hollande. Lantier added that it is critical for Assange’s defenders in France to join the Global Defense Committee; they cannot wait for nominally “left” forces like Jean-Luc Mélenchon or the New Anti-capitalist Party to take action to defend Assange. Though they have received millions of votes at various times, they neither want nor seek to build a mass movement of protests and strikes demanding Assange’s freedom.

A lively discussion ensued. One member of the audience from Poland warned that the extradition of Assange from Britain, simply for publishing material that displeased the US government, would have a devastating impact on all opponents of US military bases in Eastern Europe and the US war drive targeting Russia. Through the Assange case, legal conditions are being created for the mass deportations of journalists or political opponents of governments around the world to US prisons.

Questions were also raised as to whether Mélenchon or similar politicians across Europe could lead a campaign to free Assange. Marsden replied by explaining that Jeremy Corbyn had defended Assange as a backbench MP but maintained silence once he became leader of the Labour Party. After Assange was snatched from the Ecuadorian embassy Corbyn, like Mélenchon, tweeted opposing Assange’s extradition to the US. But as soon as his party’s right-wing MPs protested and supported extradition to Sweden, Corbyn went on national television to support their call. He has said nothing since then. Defending Assange means opposing imperialism and its political representatives.

Dozens of attendees stayed after the end of the meeting to discuss with PES members. Josette, a retired former informatics and data administration worker, said attacks on whistleblowers had politicized her. “I haven’t understood why I became animated by this issue,” she said. “I had heard about it from a distance, but because I’m a single mother and have two children, I never had time for politics. Now that they’ve moved out and I’m not working, I’ve had the chance to look up around me at what is happening, and it’s a subject that immediately moved me.”

“I found out about the activist Aaron Swartz in 2015, by

chance, because I saw a film about him. I couldn’t understand why no one knew what was happening to him. I had that in my head, and then I learned about Julian Assange, only six months ago, while he was still in the embassy. I started reading to make up for lost time. But again, I am shocked by the fact that many people do not know about this.”

“I agreed with what the speakers said about the responsibility of politicians with very large audiences for this situation, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon,” she added.

This was the first time she had attended a meeting or come into contact with the Parti de l’égalité socialiste, Josette explained. “It’s clear now that there are not many structures today that can develop an international framework to defend Assange. If the PES can do that, then I’m with them. After that, we’ll see.”

Alexei was also at his first PES meeting. “My aim has never been to be political,” he said after the meeting. “But when you realize that there are people, whistleblowers, who find themselves in this situation that they shouldn’t be in, it becomes political just to defend those who are speaking about our society.

“Assange has no way to speak, to defend himself. This is not a real trial. We know he has been psychologically tortured. I agreed that this is something that we must oppose on an international scale. To express one’s ideas is important—and that’s why I’ve always been on the side of Assange.”

“I’ve been involved in the campaign since the beginning to defend Assange,” said Frédérique, a retiree. “I’ve been involved in two demonstrations with different groups. But today I don’t see anything else being organized. The opposition is very fragmented, and I do not see any political assessment or perspective. That is why I came to today’s meeting. The meeting was very clear and what you spoke about, your analysis is concrete.”



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