

Watch: Chris Marsden's speech to Paris meeting to demand freedom for Assange and Manning

Chris Marsden
27 June 2019

The speech below was delivered by Socialist Equality Party (UK) National Secretary Chris Marsden to a meeting held June 23 in Paris, hosted by the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), entitled, "Free Julian Assange! Free Chelsea Manning!" See the full report on the meeting here.

On April 11, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was seized from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

He was arrested and forcibly dragged out by a police snatch-squad after Ecuador illegally terminated his political asylum.

Within hours, a US warrant for conspiracy with Chelsea Manning, issued in December 2017, was made public.

The alleged conspiracy involved documents Manning, then a soldier, leaked in early 2010—the Iraq war logs, Afghan war logs and US diplomatic cables.

The single unsealed charge was for "Conspiracy to Commit Computer Intrusion."

But Assange's US counsel Barry Pollack made clear that the allegations "boil down to encouraging a source to provide him information and taking efforts to protect the identity of that source. Journalists around the world should be deeply troubled by these unprecedented criminal charges."

That same afternoon, Assange was found guilty of a bail offence dating back to 2012. Then on May 1, Judge Deborah Taylor sentenced Assange to 50 weeks in Belmarsh maximum security prison. She declared, "You have been exploiting your privileged position to flout the law and advertise internationally your disdain for the law of this country."

For eight years, Assange and his legal team explained that a secret US Grand Jury investigation was underway. Assange himself stressed that the laws on which US authorities were "working toward an indictment are the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986."

These warnings about US extradition and a secret grand jury were denounced as "conspiracy theory." But last month, on May 23, the US Department of Justice [DOJ] brought 17 additional charges against Assange under the Espionage Act, carrying a prison term of 175 years.

All charges are related to WikiLeaks' disclosures of war crimes and human rights abuses by the US government.

This is the first time that a journalist has been charged under the 1917 Espionage Act. Assange has been indicted for carrying out core journalistic activities protected under the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

His fate is to be determined in a kangaroo court in February next year, presided over by Judge Emma Arbuthnot.

She is the wife of Tory politician James Arbuthnot, the former chair of Parliament's Defence Select Committee and a member of the advisory board of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies [RUSI].

He is a director of Security Intelligence Consultancy SC Strategy Ltd,

along with Sir John Scarlett, the former head of MI6. He is linked to the defence company Thales.

There are almost 2,000 references in WikiLeaks databases to Thales and 61 to RUSI.

This is British imperialist class justice in action!

It must be stressed that the attack on WikiLeaks did not begin under Trump. It was Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice-President Joe Biden who initiated a political manhunt against Assange, describing him as a "cyber-terrorist" and threat to "national security."

Within weeks of the "Collateral Murder" video's release, Bradley Manning, who has now transitioned to Chelsea Manning, was arrested, court martialled and sentenced to 35 years in a military prison. Her sentence was commuted, but she is now back in jail for refusing to testify against Assange.

On November 29, 2010, Obama's attorney general, Eric Holder, said that the DOJ had begun an "active, ongoing criminal investigation" into WikiLeaks.

The Democrats provided the political environment for former House Speaker Newt Gingrich to describe Assange as a "terrorist," who "should be treated as an enemy combatant."

Fox News commentator Bob Beckel declared that the US should assassinate Assange because "A dead man can't leak stuff...there's only one way to do it: illegally shoot the son of a bitch." Among others who called for the death penalty was Donald Trump.

And the Democrats are still numbered among the most vicious and unprincipled opponents of Assange.

They centre their attack on bogus claims that he worked with Russia and Trump to thwart the glorious prospect of the degraded warmonger Hilary Clinton assuming presidential office. Ignored is the fact that WikiLeaks exposed her efforts to schmooze Wall Street and the dirty tricks campaign against Bernie Sanders.

It was to make the plan to permanently silence Assange a reality that efforts were launched to frame up Assange on bogus rape allegations while he was in Sweden in mid-August 2010.

Now, after being opened and closed on three separate occasions, without a single charge being laid, a Swedish court has ruled Assange should not be detained in absentia over the allegations against him because the frameup mounted is so threadbare.

No one can deny any longer that Assange faces indefinite detention, torture and possibly even the death penalty in the United States. All those who try to hide behind the Swedish allegations to justify a refusal to defend him—such as Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn—are co-conspirators with US and British imperialism in efforts to silence one of their fiercest critics.

Assange's life is in danger. Even before being rendered to the US he is

being subjected to the equivalent of a slow-motion assassination.

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer has declared that Assange “has been deliberately exposed, for a period of several years, to progressively severe forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the cumulative effects of which can only be described as psychological torture.”

He concluded: “In 20 years of work with victims of war, violence and political persecution I have never seen a group of democratic States ganging up to deliberately isolate, demonise and abuse a single individual for such a long time and with so little regard for human dignity and the rule of law.”

Assange has been hospitalised already. But he is in a maximum-security facility surrounded by murderers and gangsters. Anything could happen.

The plight of Assange is a product of the rightward lurch by all the imperialist powers toward dictatorial forms of rule, militarism and war.

People in this room have been subjected to massive state violence during the “yellow vest” protests against [French President Emmanuel] Macron—the president of the rich.

Over 2,500 injured and around a hundred seriously—23 have lost the use of an eye, five have lost a hand and one a testicle. Over 6,000 arrests.

Globally, even as we meet today, the press is filled with reports of how Trump came within 10 minutes of sanctioning an air strike on Iran that would have set fire to the entire Middle east and threatened world war.

Massive and sustained austerity amid grotesque levels of social inequality and a descent into militarism and war cannot be enforced by democratic means. They demand state repression the likes of which have not been seen in Europe since the fascist regimes of the 1930s.

Efforts are being made to silence Assange and WikiLeaks out of fear of the development of a politically informed and mobilised working class and in anticipation of the entry of millions, hundreds of millions, into struggle.

For the same reason, our news portal, the *World Socialist Web Site*, is subjected to constant censorship efforts by Google and other social media giants working with the state. And our party in Germany has been placed on the secret service list as a “left-wing extremist” threat to the German state.

There is no time to lose.

The entire political establishment is ranged against Assange. But opposition to this system is growing in the working class. And it is this massive force that must now be mobilised to secure freedom for Assange and Manning.

On June 20, the WSWS international editorial board issued a call: “For a worldwide campaign to prevent Julian Assange’s rendition to the US! For the formation of a Global Defence Committee to secure his freedom!”

You will have copies, I know, but it makes the following essential points:

- The aim of this campaign must be to politically arouse and mobilise the international working class—the most powerful social force on the planet.

- The latent solidarity of millions for Julian Assange must be transformed into a conscious political movement. The working class must make his defence the focal point for a counteroffensive against militarism and all attacks on democratic and social rights.

- Victory in this struggle requires a political perspective. The defence of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning must be guided by a global strategy that consciously links the fight to defend democratic rights to the real and growing social struggle of the international working class against capitalist exploitation and political oppression.

- The movement to secure Julian Assange’s freedom must come from below. Moral appeals to the governments that are persecuting him are less than useless. Assange’s freedom must be fought for independently of—and in opposition to—the political agents of the ruling class.

- Guided by such a strategy, this fight can be won. Pessimism cannot contribute anything to the fight but demoralisation. What can be achieved will be determined in struggle.

Let me cite just one important example proving the correctness of this perspective and orientation from the history of the British workers’ movement.

Between 1970 and 1974, the UK was engulfed in a wave of class struggle that ended with the downfall of the Conservative government. Around 50 million days were lost to strike action including two national miners’ strikes, the first national builders’ strike and two national dockers’ strikes.

The state responded with brutal repression. Private armies were formed. The army was on the streets.

Five shop stewards were jailed in Pentonville in July 1972 for picketing a container depot in East London.

In response, all the major ports came to a standstill, as 250,000 dockers struck. Printers in Fleet Street walked out, stopping virtually all the national dailies, and rolling strikes were implemented by other sections of workers.

A blockade of the prison by tens of thousands of workers secured their release.

This was a movement with revolutionary implications.

The unions worked might and main to bring the situation under control. It was later exposed that 21 union leaders were meeting regularly with MI5, and the head of the National Union of Mineworkers, Joe Gormley, was an informant for Special Branch. In the end, it was left to an incoming Labour government to stabilise the situation for the ruling class and allow it to regroup and go on the offensive under Margaret Thatcher.

It was also thanks to the trade union bureaucracy, the Labour Party and the Communist Party that the state was able to get away with arresting 24 building workers for picketing and sentencing two of them to years in prison—CP member Des Warren and Ricky Tomlinson.

One of those building workers arrested, Terry Renshaw, drew attention to the freeing of the Pentonville 5, to emphasise his agreement with the WSWS:

“To defend class war prisoners like Julian Assange, the perspective has got to be to raise the awareness and mobilise the masses. It can’t be any other way. Marx said that if the masses act together they will win. ... Only the power of the working class, not the official courts, is going to provide any perspective for freeing Assange.”

I was struck by how Terry’s words echoed those of “yellow vest” protester Stéphane, which I will also quote:

“We should all get together and go to where he is imprisoned in London and free him. What you’re saying about this being international is important.

“In the whole world we are almost 7 billion people. The class that is exploiting us is practically nothing. We should all unite against that class.”

Exactly! But consider the stress placed here by Stéphane on the international character of the struggle that must be waged.

We have been fighting in France to alert workers to the implications of the globalisation of production: how this drives the ruling class in every country to slash wages and destroy essential services in order to secure advantage in a trade war for control of world markets that can only end in military conflict; how this has cut the ground from under the old national reformist parties and trade unions and transformed them into direct appendages of the employers and the state in their war on the working class.

And we have insisted that the only way forward is through a unified movement of the international working class, whose numbers and social power have increased massively, are united objectively by production processes that span continents and who will be undefeatable if the combine their struggles against the common capitalist enemy.

These are political conclusions that find a receptive audience among workers who have been engaged in major struggles against the employers and the state.

The same conclusions will be drawn by millions more. They will see through the lies and slanders directed against Assange and Manning and see them as “One of us” and prisoners of the class war.

The PES and all the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International have made clear we are appealing to all those who want freedom for Assange and Manning to come together to make sure this is accomplished.

Our statement explains:

- We welcome and seek the collaboration—based on a principled commitment to the defence of democratic rights—of all progressive, socialist and left-wing individuals and organisations in this historic fight. We do not require or expect that those who join this committee agree with all aspects of the political views and programme advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

- There must be a place for a wide range of positions—necessarily excluding those of the political right—among those engaged in this critical defence campaign. We only require that those who join the committee are unconditionally committed to the defence of democratic rights and recognise that the freedom of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning depends upon the building of a popular mass movement.

We conclude:

“No one who is seriously committed to the defence of democratic rights can stand on the sidelines. The case of Julian Assange is a critical twenty-first century battleground in the defence of free speech, truth, and the fight against exploitation, dictatorship and war, the basic evils of the world capitalist system.”

But let me also conclude with this observation.

No other political tendency is so placed to lead this offensive as our own. Our entire history is based on the struggle to unite the international working class in the struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

And, after decades of betrayals, we do so under conditions where the rotten reformist, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies have discredited themselves in the eyes of advanced workers and youth everywhere.

We have already been waging a struggle on a world scale for the freedom of Assange and Manning. Here is a montage of rallies, pickets and meetings held in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, in Berlin, India and Sri Lanka and in the UK where the conspiracy against these heroes is being played out.

Today, here in Paris, we launch the next stage in that international movement. We make our appeal to the French working class, with its powerful democratic and socialist traditions.

Those gathered here are the modern-day Dreyfusards! We will go forward together in this historic struggle.





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