

UK: Strong support for Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning at Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival

Our reporters
23 July 2019

As part of the global defence campaign to secure freedom for Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, the Socialist Equality Party attended the Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival in Dorchester on Sunday. A campaign stall won support from hundreds of workers, students and retirees.

The annual festival commemorates the lives of six agricultural labourers from Dorset, arrested and convicted in 1834 for swearing an oath to form a union. The men were sentenced to seven years' transportation to Australia. Five were sent to New South Wales and the sixth—George Loveless—was sent in chains to Tasmania.

Landowners and the government were determined to teach a lesson to the workers, with Judge Baron Williams declaring their punishment would serve as “an example and a warning.” All the trappings of British class justice were on display at a rigged trial whose jury foreman was a Whig MP and brother-in-law to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

But the capitalist establishment was soon shaken by a powerful working-class movement demanding freedom for the convicted labourers. A meeting of 10,000 was held in March 1834, with a committee formed to fight for their release. The following month, 100,000 rallied near London's Kings Cross, presenting an 800,000-strong petition to Parliament.

In 1837, all six workers were pardoned. They returned to England and continued their fight, with the press complaining that Loveless, “instead of quietly fulfilling the duties of his station, is still dabbling in the dirty waters of radicalism and publishing pamphlets to keep up the old game.”

The freedom won for the Tolpuddle Martyrs showed

what an organised working class could achieve and helped inspire the growth of the Chartist movement.

On Sunday, one section of marchers cheered when they saw the SEP's stall with posters of Assange and Manning and many others gave a thumbs-up as they passed by. Hundreds of people took copies of the WSWS statement “For a global campaign to prevent Julian Assange's rendition to the United States!”

SEP campaigners drew attention to the statement's insistence that “The case of Julian Assange is a critical 21st century battleground in the defence of free speech, truth and the fight against exploitation, dictatorship and war, the basic evils of the capitalist system.”

Throughout the afternoon, dozens of people approached the stall to ask for more information and many signed up to join the global defence campaign.

Claire described Assange's arrest on April 11 as a watershed event: “It was so frightening. I couldn't watch the television when he was arrested and dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy. It was so upsetting. People don't understand what is at stake. It is freedom of the press and right to know the truth. Assange is a very principled man with lot of integrity. He is really brave.”

“He didn't have to retract anything,” she added, “I am really with him in Belmarsh [prison]. I hope he is okay.”

Kate agreed, explaining: “Chelsea Manning also played a crucial role in these revelations. If there wasn't a media outlet like WikiLeaks, we wouldn't have known these things. They revealed the secrets of the state they don't want us to know about. He revealed them with 100 percent accuracy. He is being smeared because he is speaking the truth about power.”

Sheila Goodchild told the SEP's campaigners, "I support Julian Assange because he has been made scapegoat for doing something which is basically good for the majority of the people. The media and the establishment are supporting his persecution. He is not a well man, I believe. They want somebody to blame for letting us know all this stuff carried out behind our backs. We want more whistle-blowers, not fewer."

Bill Dobbs, a retired teacher, said that he regularly reads WSWS coverage on Assange, describing a speech by the SEP's Julie Hyland as one of the best speeches in defence of Assange that he has heard.

He said, "The way WikiLeaks discovered what our governments have done, it's made me feel ashamed of being an Englishman. It's simply not the way we should be treating people. The awful Isabel Oakeshott who writes for the *Mail* and is a member of the Integrity Initiative, which is hell bent on twisting reality, she's able to publish what our ex-ambassador in Washington has to say about Trump, in an exact parallel with what Julian Assange was doing with the DNC [Democratic National Committee] emails. It's shooting the messenger."

Dobb's wife, Jacqueline, interjected on the role of the media, "We used to take the *Guardian*, but we no longer do. They're going for the neo-liberal line now, and any hope of them being a supporter of the left is just not happening at all. As for the awful people such as [*Guardian* journalist] Shaun Walker, I read their articles and they're appalling. Blatant lying in some cases."

Barry, a retired delivery driver, said he supported Assange, "Because he's an honest decent guy who's trying to make the world a better place and uncover all of the atrocities that various countries are doing throughout the world. Terrible things, I've seen them on YouTube. He's trying to uncover all of that to stop it happening again. He's a very important guy. He should be released from wherever he is at the moment."

Tom from Dorset said, "I think it's been a complete fix-up. The Americans want to send him over there, to try him for crimes that aren't crimes in my view. Assange is allowing information that should be public, and I think it is an absolute disgrace that the Americans are trying to put pressure on us to send him and extradite him to America."

Vincent, a research physicist, said, "Julian Assange

has done a lot to inform us about what is going on. Everybody in the media has taken his information and relayed it and now that he is in jail, everyone thinks that it is just normal. People can say what they like about him but what he has achieved is bigger than that. What he has achieved is really big and it is useful for the public."

The sympathy for Assange and Manning among festival goers stood in marked contrast to the attitude of the Labour and trade union bureaucrats on the speakers' platform. Not a single union official or Labour MP—including party leader Jeremy Corbyn—so much as mentioned the name Julian Assange.

The line-up of union officials at the event, including Trades Union Congress President and Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) leader Mark Serwotka and Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, only served to highlight the gulf between the early labour movement martyrs and today's corporatist organisations staffed by well-paid functionaries who suppress the struggles of the working class.

In April, Serwotka declared that PCS members could not strike over pay despite a 91.3 percent "yes" vote for industrial action. A statement from the PCS announced: "Massive vote for action on pay, but anti-union laws will block a strike." The unions routinely cite the Tories' anti-union laws against workers in order to block and suppress industrial action and block any challenge to the Conservative government's agenda of austerity, militarism and state repression.



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