

The significance of the doctors' open letter in defence of Julian Assange

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The *World Socialist Web Site* applauds the medical doctors who have issued an open letter calling for urgent action to protect the life of imprisoned WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange.

More than 65 doctors from the UK, US, Australia, Germany, Italy and Sri Lanka have brought to the attention of a global audience the terrible dangers to Assange's life. They wrote to Britain's Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel on Friday, warning, "Mr. Assange could die" because of years of arbitrary detention and his continued incarceration in almost permanent isolation in London's Belmarsh maximum security prison.

The doctors insist that Assange be moved to a university teaching hospital, where he can be assessed and treated by an expert medical team. They stress, "The medical situation is thereby urgent. There is no time to lose."

We urge workers, young people and all those concerned with democratic rights to heed the doctors' warning and join the fight to defend Julian Assange as well as the courageous whistle-blower Chelsea Manning, who has also been locked away for refusing to give false testimony against Assange.

The doctors' initiative marks a new stage in the struggle to free Assange because it has been taken independently by a group of professional workers, animated by profound concern for his fate and for democratic rights.

The doctors were acutely concerned by the findings of Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, that Assange is suffering the effects of prolonged "psychological torture" after nearly a decade of arbitrary detention and state persecution, which "may soon end up costing his life." They saw how this warning by the world's foremost authority on torture

was simply dismissed by the UK government.

Following the harrowing account of Assange's physical and mental condition given by former British diplomat and whistle-blower Craig Murray, who attended the October 21 Westminster Magistrates Court hearing at which Assange appeared, the doctors decided to act. They resolved that it was their professional duty to report "suspected torture of which they become aware, wherever it may be occurring... That professional duty is absolute and must be carried out regardless of risk to reporting doctors."

The brave and independent action of the doctors has inspired many others, evoking a powerful global response and forcing the world's media to report on the letter. Other doctors are now coming forward to append their own signature.

The open letter has revealed the massive but latent support for Assange that can and must be mobilised in his defence. The central issue is how this must be done.

On June 20, the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* issued a statement, "For a worldwide campaign to prevent Julian Assange's rendition to the US!" The statement stated: "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."

This position has been fully vindicated by the open letter.

The doctors' stand was taken in defiance of a vindictive gang-up against Assange involving the state machinery and governments of the United States, the UK, Australia, Sweden and Ecuador to punish him for exposing war crimes in Afghanistan and elsewhere and then silence him forever.

Dr Stephen Frost, a specialist in diagnostic radiology, wrote of the open letter: “If the UK government does not heed doctors’ warnings and continues with its current reckless, dangerous and cruel behaviour, people from all over the world will rightly call for those responsible to be held to account. We say that the situation is medically urgent and that it must not be allowed to continue. There is no time to lose. The torture must stop NOW.”

In response, the UK government has again made clear that nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of the plans to stage a show trial next February before carrying out a predetermined decision to extradite Assange to the US. Patel’s Home Office issued a statement to the media yesterday declaring, “The allegations Mr. Assange was subjected to torture are unfounded and wholly false. The UK is committed to upholding the rule of law and ensuring that no one is ever above it.”

The open letter cuts across the toxic mixture of personal and political slanders employed by the liberal media, social democratic parties, including Britain’s Labour Party, trade unions, civil rights organisations, right-wing feminists and various pseudo-left groups to justify their refusal to defend Assange.

The letter was issued at the height of Britain’s general election campaign. It was sent to Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott. But she has refused to issue any statement whatsoever. Neither Abbott nor Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has once mentioned the world’s most famous political prisoner during the course of the campaign—a man incarcerated less than 12 miles from the Houses of Parliament. His name doesn’t appear in Labour’s manifesto, even when it pledges to protect “whistle-blowers” and bring in “a legal right of public interest defence for journalists.”

Corbyn has tried to justify his refusal to defend Assange by citing the bogus sexual allegations made by two women in a case that was dropped for the second time in 2017. In April, he declared that if the case was “reinstated,” then Assange “must answer those questions and those demands about the accusations made against him.”

The Swedish investigation was dropped last week, after nine years in which no charges were ever brought. But neither this, nor the intervention by over 60

doctors, will prompt Corbyn to act in defiance of the state conspiracy against Assange.

For the ruling class, the persecution of Assange is the spearhead of a massive assault on democratic rights, aimed at destroying freedom of speech, illegalizing investigative journalism, intimidating and terrorizing critics, preventing the exposure of government crimes and suppressing popular opposition to social inequality and war.

The *World Socialist Web Site* insists that only the working class, the world’s most powerful social force, has the necessary strength to oppose this and that it must do so independently of the old parties and trade unions.

Just as the capitalist class is using the persecution of Assange as the linchpin of its plans for dictatorship, so the working class must make his defence the focal point for a counteroffensive against militarism and all attacks on democratic and social rights.

Already there is a rising tide of international class struggle, strikes and mass protests against social inequality and corrupt government, which provides the powerful mass foundation for the struggle for Assange’s freedom.

The defence of Assange must be guided by a global strategy that consciously links the fight to defend democratic rights to the growing social struggle of the international working class against capitalist exploitation and political oppression. The Socialist Equality Parties, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, call on all those who fear for Assange’s life and want to see a heroic and innocent man freed to join this vital struggle.



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