“We hope this protest will inspire others”

French “yellow vests” protest for Assange outside Belmarsh prison in London

Alex Lantier
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Today, hundreds of “yellow vests” from France and protesters from other countries across Europe, including Belgium and Britain, are protesting outside Belmarsh maximum security prison in London to demand the freeing of WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange.

A principled and courageous journalist whose revelations exposed imperialist crimes against humanity and encouraged working class protests around the world, Assange is the target of a relentless state campaign to destroy him. He is locked up in Belmarsh, subjected to torture according to testimony from doctors and UN experts, and faces extradition to America. There, he faces a life sentence in prison under the US Espionage Act, for publishing material such as the “Collateral Murder” video of US troops illegally gunning down civilians in US-occupied Iraq.

The decision of the “yellow vests” to protest in London points to deeply rooted international opposition to the relentless persecution of Assange among workers and more serious artists and intellectuals. As part of their initiative, they have also issued a petition, signed by over 15,000 people, including leading figures of French and European artistic life, titled “Freedom for Julian Assange.”

Corinne and Yannick, two “yellow vests” involved in organizing the Belmarsh protest, spoke to the WSWS after a recent “yellow vest” protest in Paris. “Assange represents the struggle against the persecution of journalists who defend the truth. We are defending journalism against an abuse of democracy,” Corrine noted. “As yellow vests, or otherwise, we cannot be indifferent to his fate.”

Pointing to Assange’s struggle “against war crimes and for truth,” she added, “There is a campaign to persecute a man whose only crime was to carry out journalism and not to be bought.”

She explained, “We chose the date of January 25. It is a month before the extradition hearing begins. As a group, we are publishing reports that we receive. We have the feeling that if we stay at home, nothing will change... We want to launch an alarm and help Assange’s message become more widely known.”

The defense of Assange is a critical question for the international working class. WikiLeaks’ revelations of US complicity in the corruption of Tunisian President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali helped trigger mass workers' protests that brought down Ben Ali, followed by the Egyptian working class’ toppling of imperialist-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak less than a month later.

The persecution of Assange comes amid a universal turn by imperialist governments to crush mass protests and left-wing opposition, symbolized by French President Emmanuel Macron’s repression of “yellow vest” protests against social inequality. Some 11,000 people have been detained and 4,400 wounded, including dozens who lost eyes to rubber bullets, amid a state crackdown of unprecedented scope since the Nazi occupation. Two bystanders, Zineb Redouane and Steve Caniço, were killed as police assaulted demonstrations.

Corinne said, “Our capitalist governments wage war, commit war crimes and acts of espionage. We hear about them every day... We are victims of the same system, of the same states. There are 400 ‘yellow vests’ in prison currently, and 900 facing prosecution, with others wounded or dead. We are starting to realize what the state is capable of doing. This has opened the

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eyes of many people who did not know Assange before and who now support our cause. This is why I think there is a real parallel between ‘yellow vest’ protests and defending Assange. It isn’t just activism.”

Amid an international resurgence of class struggle and the discrediting of NATO governments, the “yellow vest” petition in defense of Assange has attracted thousands of signatures, including from hundreds of internationally renowned artists.

It states, “Can we wait any longer, amid the general indifference and silence of the major media to such a violation of fundamental rights asserted in international texts on liberty, personal dignity but also freedom of expression and freedom of the press that are fundamental to democracy? Today Julian Assange is targeted. Who will it be tomorrow: which whistleblowers, journalists, editors, writers or artists? As members of the cultural community with a specific responsibility, we are also aware of the emergency posed by Julian’s state of health.”

Signatories of this appeal in defense of Assange include German actress Hanna Schygulla, Serbian director Emir Kusturica, Franco-Croatian writer and director Josiane Balasko, actor Bruno Podalydès, director Jean-Jacques Beineix, and dozens of other leading artists.

The decision of representatives of the “yellow vest” protests mobilizing French workers and of the European artistic community to come to Assange’s defense powerfully underscores the possibility and the necessity of building a mass international movement to free Assange. Already, there have been mass protests in Ecuador, the country in whose London embassy Assange sought asylum before being arrested and jailed in Belmarsh.

Yannick said, “The ‘yellow vest’ movement has two distinct branches. Some protest with the French flag. They are not necessarily neo-fascist, but they want French people to live better. But we want humanity to live better, we are internationalists. There are ever more ‘yellow vests’ who think this way, though there are also those who wave the French flag because of its revolutionary history, but the internationalist tendency is growing, you can see that from the demands they advance.”

The “yellow vests” hope their protest will encourage broader layers of the population to mobilize in defense of Assange. He added: “We see this in protest movements in every country, they raise international issues. We hope this protest will inspire others.”

He said the protest aimed to encourage “people to become conscious of the importance of Assange’s struggle and of the role of journalism.” Comparing the state persecution of Assange to the incarceration of political opponents of the racist apartheid regime in South Africa, he added, “What is taking place with Assange today is a form of segregation of speech and of truth. And this is taking place worldwide.”

This underscores the urgent necessity of mobilizing workers and youth internationally in defense of Assange, only weeks before he faces a court ruling that could extradite him to America, where he faces the danger of execution.

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