

Interview with international model Andreja Pejic: ‘I think standing behind Assange and Manning is where we should all be’

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World Socialist Web Site writers Sue Phillips and Will Marshall had the opportunity in January to discuss the campaign to free persecuted WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning, as well as broader political issues, with internationally-acclaimed model Andreja Pejic.

Pejic was in Melbourne to visit her family and as a celebrity guest at the gala opening of the National Gallery of Victoria International’s summer exhibition, “Crossing Lines.”

Wikipedia notes: “Before coming out as a transwoman in late 2013, Pejic was known as the first completely androgynous supermodel. Today she is one of the most recognised transgender models in the world.” She has appeared on the front cover of international editions of *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *L’Officiel* and *Fashion*.

In May 2015, Pejic became the first transgender model profiled by *Vogue*. In 2016, Pejic was awarded “Best International Female Model” by fashion magazine *GQ Portugal*. The following year she was the first transgender woman to appear on the cover of *GQ*. Pejic made her major film debut in the 2018 crime thriller film *The Girl in the Spider’s Web*.

Pejic was born in Tuzla, in the Bosnian region of Yugoslavia in August 1991, just prior to the outbreak of ethno-nationalist civil war. Her family was forced to flee as refugees to Serbia. Along with her mother, her older brother and grandmother, she migrated to Australia in the aftermath of the 1999 US-NATO war against Serbia.

Pejic grew up in the working-class suburb of Broadmeadows in Melbourne. After completing her secondary schooling at University High, Pejic was accepted to study medicine at the University of Melbourne. Pejic deferred her university study after she was scouted as a model while working part-time at McDonalds.

Pejic is a socialist-minded artist who is an outspoken and principled advocate for transgender rights. She has spoken out strongly against identity politics, emphasising the domination and centrality of class division in understanding capitalist society.

In December, Pejic attended a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) public meeting in Melbourne in defence of Assange and Manning with her brother Igor, and her mother Jadranka.

WSWS: Thanks very much for giving us your time to discuss the critical issue of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. Could you speak about the significance of their exposures of war crimes in the Middle East?

Andreja Pejic: I think what Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning have done is huge for democratic principles and human rights. It is a thing that we are sort of ignoring. It’s like this big elephant in the room. We are told about the crimes of different dictatorships—like Russia, or Iran or China—but what we’re ignoring are the imperialist war crimes, the crimes by Western governments. These things need to be confronted if we’re going to fight for a better society. It can’t be swept under the rug.

WSWS: Do you see any connection between the attempts to silence Assange and Manning and the escalating US war drive against Iran?

AP: Yes, I feel that America is in a political crisis. Obviously, we have already had a huge economic crisis in 2008 and this is paving the road towards the destruction of democracy and towards an authoritarian system. I have always known that Western interventions were sham from a young age. It was nothing new to me, I guess. But slowly people are beginning to wake up that the US military is not spreading democracy in these places. If you look at Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria—where are these thriving democracies they were fighting for?

WSWS: Could you explain your own experience as a refugee from the US-NATO war in Yugoslavia and the impact that it had on your political outlook?

AP: I was born six months before the start of the Yugoslav wars. My mum was Serbian and my dad was Croatian. They grew up in a country that had been united for 50 years and it was normal for them to have their marriage. Then the war breaks out and she has to take my brother and me and my grandmother to Serbia and it split my family up.

They thought that it was going to be a two-month war, something that would be resolved very quickly. But it ended up as a five-year civil war—the worst war in Europe since World War II—and we ended up growing up in a refugee camp. I just remember this terribly tense situation as we were growing up, with the national divides and the racism from all sides.

That experience propelled me, especially when we came to Australia, to want to know what happened and to find a better explanation than blaming any particular nationality. So, I researched and that led me to discover you guys [the WSW and SEP]. It propelled me to learn about history. Why did the Soviet Union fall? Why did the system that [Yugoslav leader Josip Broz] Tito upheld break down? Why did this horrible war happen?

This had a huge impact on me politically. I discovered the imperialist crimes in that whole situation. What the West did when it approved Slovenia’s secession [from Yugoslavia in 1991] and then, later, what the US did to Serbia with the NATO bombings. It was horrific.

I was wondering why a society which was claiming to be so democratic could do something like that. Why so many so-called progressively-minded people in the West supported that war? I think it was one of the first wars that the liberal intelligentsia got behind. I was searching for a better explanation.

I now have this huge aversion to nationalism. People always ask me in interviews, are you Croatian, are you Serbian, are you Australian? I always answer them that this is where I was born; this is where I spent my childhood; this is where I spent my teenage years; and now I live in America. I don’t think national identity is a healthy thing because I’ve

seen a country destroyed by it. Nationalism was exploited to divide the country and to divide my family.

WSWS: You left the Balkans as a refugee and you have returned? What is your overview—from what the Balkans was, to what it is now?

AP: The country still hasn't recovered from the war. The economic level and the cultural level are much lower than it was. The democracy is corrupt and social conditions are terrible. The inequality is huge. The political arena is dominated by criminals.

WSWS: It's been revealed that while Assange was in the Ecuadorian embassy the security firm UC Global was secretly spying on and filming him, and all of that was being live streamed to the CIA.

AP: Everything that's been done to Julian Assange and to Chelsea Manning is appalling. Julian being imprisoned in Belmarsh Prison, in the worst conditions, denied access to his legal representation and the huge smear campaign in the media and politically to destroy his name. Chelsea Manning being hauled in front of a secret court, imprisoned again and fined \$1,000 each day. It's appalling.

WSWS: There have been many statements by Nils Melzer and doctors internationally about Assange's health. He's been living for a decade under conditions of psychological torture. What do you think about this situation? They've called for his immediate release, or at the very least, be transferred to a university hospital to receive proper medical care.

AP: These are extraordinary times to be living in. To see the British government and the US government—who are supposed to be leaders in the “democratic world”—to completely break the law and destroy journalists and whistleblowers for their own gains is incredibly discouraging.

WSWS: Could you speak about the Australian government which has refused to lift a finger to defend Assange to defend an Australian citizen, going right back to the Gillard Labor government?

AP: I was recently asked to do an interview for *Harper's Bazaar*. They wanted to do an article about women's voices and they wanted to include Julia Gillard. And I said “No” because I don't want to be in the same article as her because of the situation that is happening and her role in it. She could have stepped in to protect Assange.

The Australian government has failed to protect one of its citizens. It has protected journalists before, but it has failed to do that in Assange's case. It's just extraordinary. The level of conspiracy amounts to an internationally organised witch-hunt.

I think Labor should be putting up a real opposition to the government's failure to protect Australia's greatest anti-war journalist from political persecution. It should admit its past failure and work to expose this issue to the biggest audience, so that a movement can be built to stop the extradition.

WSWS: In addition to your successful modelling career, you've been known for speaking out and promoting transgender rights. In social media and public statements, you've spoken strongly against identity politics, emphasising the centrality of class. Can you explain that further?

AP: I've been open about my experience, about my medical issues and personal things, because I felt that I had a social responsibility and opportunity to open people's minds and hearts to something that is very different. But at the same time, there isn't an understanding that minorities are being manipulated by the Democratic Party and by such forces to paint a better picture of them. I think that there isn't an understanding of class, and how minorities are also divided into classes like the rest of the population.

At the end of the day, a transgender worker, or an African-American worker, or any minority worker, has more in common with all other workers than they do with this upper-middle-class layer. In the framework of identity politics, all women are thought to be in the same situation, all trans people or all LGBTI people are thought to be in the same situation, but they're not. They are divided into classes just as much.

WSWS: Could you speak about how identity politics and the allegations against Assange vis-à-vis the Swedish case were used?

AP: I remember posting about Assange on Instagram and getting criticised by feminists and by Hillary Clinton supporters. How can you, they said, who has said so many progressive things, and stood for something, protect someone they feel is a rapist, or caused Donald Trump to be elected, and ruined Hilary Clinton's campaign?

At the end of the day, Assange and Manning have sacrificed their lives for our democratic rights and to expose for all people—from every race and every gender and sexuality—the truth about what our governments are doing. Hilary Clinton is the reason that Trump got elected. If she has committed crimes, she needs to answer for them, not the other way around.

Where there's a leader of an African nation, or an Eastern European nation, and they commit a war of aggression, we expect them to go before an international tribunal and face war crimes charges. But when it comes to Western politicians, we expect them to go golfing, or do speeches, and cash in. This is completely unfair.

Assange wasn't even charged. These were allegations and, from what I've read about the case, there are so many holes and there's been a huge cover-up. He was OK going to Sweden and facing these allegations if Sweden was not going to extradite him to the US. That's a fact that is left out. And now, of course, they've dropped the allegations because there wasn't a basis to them.

WSWS: In December, it was Chelsea Manning's 32nd birthday. She's now been in jail in Virginia for nine months. She has taken a principled stand and refused to appear before the grand jury in the US. She has said that no matter what happens to her, she will not break her principles. How do you see Manning's role?

AP: Chelsea Manning is one of the most inspirational people from the same community as me. What she's done is incredibly inspiring and incredibly brave. To uphold her principles, to not go the easy way, to endure torture—the UN charged the US government, or accused the US government, of torturing her. My heart goes out to her. I wish there was more support for her within the LGBTI community.

WSWS: There has been a certain abandonment of Chelsea Manning by the gay and transgender organisations that have links to the Democratic Party.

AP: This is incredibly disheartening. I remember there was a gay pride parade in New York, and I was hoping that there would be more statements in support of her. I know that Manning has done things with American *Vogue*. She has done things with a lot of publications who are in fashion which, when she was pardoned by Obama, celebrated her.

We need to keep celebrating her, and we need to support her. It's sad to see how little thinking, how little consciousness, there is in this whole scenario. We're not supposed to just do what the Democratic Party tells us. We can be independent and think for ourselves.

I didn't want to support the Hillary Clinton campaign. They were trying to get people throughout the celebrity world and in women's rights to support her. I stayed away from that. While I come from a minority in many different ways—not just a gender minority—I can't let that be bigger than the big picture. Considering everything I've been through in my life, I couldn't get behind a pro-war candidate like Hillary Clinton.

WSWS: What do you think of Bernie Sanders?

AP: I have read a lot about him on the WSWS. It's really interesting that so many young people voted for him, that something they think looks like socialism has become so popular in the West, in the centre of the biggest capitalist country in the world. At the same time, Sanders believes that the Democratic Party can be reformed or that it can swing to the left somehow. It's very hard to imagine that or that we can implement the Scandinavian model in America. If you look at what is happening in Europe, it's going the other way. They are dismantling the welfare

system.

WSWS: Were you living in the US when Obama was elected?

AP: Yes, I was. With Obama, I think there was this massively successful PR campaign of “hope and change.” Even people from the Republicans, from the conservative side, got on board, and the whole of the left did. Then he proved to be a huge disappointment—Syria, Yemen and Libya and Guantánamo Bay stayed open. The way the financial crisis was handled was terrible, with Obama giving an endless supply of cash to the banks.

A lot of what Trump is doing was made possible by the actions of the Obama administration. I went to a protest about refugees in Mexico. A lot of those centres were built under Obama. He also deported more immigrants than any other president in the history of the United States. It was a big fat PR campaign.

WSWS: Do you see that there is any relationship between the attacks on Assange and the drive to censor the internet and social media?

AP: Yes, the internet has played a revolutionary role in that it has connected people across the world and exposed them to alternative information. People are starting to question the political and economic system more and more. The governments and ruling elites want to clamp down on that, and stop that from spreading, like all these protests around the world. In France, in Chile, people have had enough.

The internet is there for everyone to share their voices, for information to flow freely, and not to be monopolised by the biggest players or controlled by the biggest governments. It’s probably the greatest question of our time, and especially with young people. I grew up with the internet, and it taught me everything I wanted to know. I think there is a huge power in information and it’s this power that they want to take away from us.

WSWS: Pamela Anderson, Roger Waters, John Pilger, M.I.A. have spoken out in defence of Julian Assange. Could you speak about the importance of their stand and whether others in the artistic community should speak out?

AP: I saw Pamela on the television show the “View” and she was really good. It’s beautiful to see that. I hope that more people do it. I hope that more well-known people with an even bigger audience come to his defence because there were people supporting him. Miley Cyrus and Lady Gaga went to visit Julian Assange and I remember being very much inspired by that. I think we need to bring that back. He can’t be extradited to the United States because we all know what would happen in that scenario. It would be a tragic loss for the human race.

WSWS: What do you think will happen if Assange gets extradited?

AP: Well, they’ve charged him under the Espionage Act. He is facing 175 years in prison. It could even be capital punishment. Already his health has deteriorated and he is in such a horrific state. Under no circumstances should he be extradited.

WSWS: Is there pressure within the fashion industry against speaking out in defence of Assange and Manning?

AP: There’s a lot of people in my world who just do not understand, who are well meaning and want to speak out but don’t have that political consciousness. It’s sad to see people who have an understanding of it but have held their tongues. I’m hoping that this changes. That would make things easier for the younger generation. It would make things easier for this fight. I think that these protests and opposition things that are happening sort of propel things in a better direction.

WSWS: How has the *World Socialist Web Site* impacted on your political outlook?

AP: I discovered the SEP when I went to University High. I was researching socialism at a very young age, because I wanted to know about the Balkans, and the sympathy I had for there. My mum spoke of—and still does, like a lot of people from that area—speak with nostalgia for that period of their lives in Yugoslavia. I wanted to know what the system was in Yugoslavia, what socialism really meant, what the Soviet

Union was and what the history was. And I think I found a SEP flier about your election campaign in Broadmeadows and attended a meeting.

This led me to the website. And I just devoured a lot of the historical things. I think it’s really interesting to find out what happened in China, what happened in Russia, in Yugoslavia, and the role of Stalinism in setting back socialism.

WSWS: We stress that the fight for the freedom of Assange and Manning is bound up with the mobilisation of the working class. It’s not the Labor Party, or parties such as the Greens, that are going to do this.

AP: I think the workers have all the power—they always have, they still do—and people need to understand that. When I talk about these subjects, a lot of people don’t really understand what a revolution looks like or what class struggle is. For a long time, I struggled with that idea too and to understand how that’s done and how workers are mobilised. The steps toward that are a long process but it’s incredibly important for anyone progressive to be oriented towards the working class. There’s no way around that, from what I’ve learned.

WSWS: Why should socialist-minded artists like you fight for Assange and Manning’s defence and freedom?

AP: I would say that it’s incredibly important to fight for Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange to further democracy and to further the cause for a better world. You can’t fight for a better world and ignore what they’ve accomplished, what they’ve done.

We cannot ignore democratic principles and socialist principles and achieve any kind of progress. We have to build on top of them. I think what you and the WSWS have done to defend Assange and Manning is incredibly heroic and incredibly important for the world. This period will go down in history as a huge stain on the governments of the US, and Britain and Australia, in 20 or 30 years down the line.

We live in a very complex world. There’s a lot of confusion and it’s hard to know where to stand in this huge crisis that is happening, but I think standing behind Assange and Manning is where we should all be.



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