

Growing support for Julian Assange on eve of extradition hearings

Oscar Grenfell
20 February 2020

On the eve of British court hearings this coming Monday on Julian Assange's extradition to the US, there is a growing recognition that a grave injustice, with far-reaching implications for the democratic rights of millions of people, is underway.

The critical issue is to transform this latent sentiment into a mass political movement of the working class fighting to block Assange's extradition and secure his complete freedom.

The stakes are high.

The attempt to dispatch the WikiLeaks publisher to a US prison for having exposed war crimes is the most sweeping attack on freedom of the press in decades. Assange's lawyers and colleagues, such as barrister Jennifer Robinson and WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnson, have sounded the alarm: If Assange is extradited to the US, the same can be done to any journalist, publisher or activist who falls foul of the American government.

Assange has already undergone what United Nations official Nils Melzer assessed to be psychological torture at the hands of the governments pursuing him. He now faces the prospect of being treated as a terrorist in the darkest reaches of a US prison for the rest of his life.

At an administrative hearing yesterday the WikiLeaks founder appeared gaunt and recited his date of birth in faltering tones. His lawyers signalled that during the full hearing they would point to the ban on extradition from Britain to the US for political offenses, and would detail the innumerable abuses that Assange has suffered, including having been spied on in Ecuador's London embassy by American intelligence agencies while he was a political refugee.

The evidence already brands the attempted extradition as a lawless show trial.

The representatives of the corporate press, however, are largely indifferent to these issues. Instead, they have focused on the revelation that a defence witness will testify that US President Donald Trump offered Assange a pardon through former Republican Congressman Dana Rohrabacher in late 2017. The offer allegedly was in exchange for evidence disproving the claims that Trump was elected as a result of "Russian interference" in the 2016 election.

The Democratic Party-aligned media has already responded hysterically, claiming that the reported pardon offer vindicates their discredited "Russiagate" conspiracy theories involving a nexus between Trump, Russia and WikiLeaks. In reality, negotiations between Rohrabacher and Assange were publicly reported at the time, in August of 2017.

Assange, moreover, required no inducement to deny Russian involvement in WikiLeaks' 2016 publication of Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails establishing that organisation's gross corruption. He stated on several occasions that Russia was not the source of the emails. His close collaborator Craig Murray said they had been provided by DNC insiders. And whatever the contents of the discussions, it is the Trump administration that is now spearheading the attempt to prosecute and imprison Assange.

The Democratic Party slanders against Assange and the protracted efforts of the ruling elites internationally to isolate him are breaking down.

This is expressed in Germany, where leading newspapers, artists and retired politicians have condemned Assange's persecution, and in the decision of Australian MPs Andrew Wikie and George Christensen to visit Assange in Belmarsh Prison this week and demand that the Australian government defend him as one of its citizens.

These initiatives were undoubtedly a response to a groundswell of support from below. Broad popular sympathy for Assange is one expression of a growing political radicalisation of workers and youth, who are increasingly attracted to left-wing, anti-war and socialist positions amid an upsurge of the class struggle and an explosion of imperialist militarism.

The decisive question is how the fight to free Assange is to be taken forward. The greatest mistake—and the surest route to ensuring Assange’s extradition—would be to harbour illusions that any element of the capitalist state, in Britain or elsewhere, will secure the WikiLeaks founder’s freedom.

British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is at the forefront of efforts to divert defenders of Assange behind the very political establishment responsible for his dire plight.

The Labour leader, like his colleagues, promoted the attempt to frame Assange on bogus sexual misconduct allegations in Sweden. Corbyn then remained silent on Assange, Britain’s political prisoner, for over 10 months, including during last year’s general election. The transparent purpose was to suppress opposition, particularly among rank-and-file Labour Party members, to Assange’s extradition.

Now, having lost the election after capitulating to the right-wing of his own party on every occasion, Corbyn has stated that he opposes the US persecution of Assange. The declaration, just weeks before he will stand down as party leader, is aimed at rehabilitating Labour and channelling anger over the attacks on Assange behind the parliamentary set-up.

This was demonstrated by Corbyn’s attempts this week to present Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a latter-day convert to the fight to defend freedom of the press.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Corbyn said that in response to a question he asked in parliament, Johnson had “accepted” that the extradition treaty between Britain and the US was “unbalanced.” This, Corbyn proclaimed, was a “big change” from the government.

Corbyn then declared that Johnson “seems to me to understand that there is a principle here that somebody who opens up and tells the truth, as Julian Assange has done, should not face deportation to the United States.”

Johnson is an extreme right-wing figure. His program

is British nationalism, the building up of the military, an onslaught on the social rights of the working class and police state repression. He gloated when Assange was illegally dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy by British cops last year.

Corbyn made the comments as it was revealed that Johnson has surrounded himself with fascist advisors, including open advocates of eugenics.

Corbyn’s call for a moral appeal to Johnson is an attempt to divert opposition to the persecution of Assange into harmless channels. The defense of Assange, like all democratic rights, is inseparable from the struggle to build a mass socialist movement of the working class.

In other words, the campaign to free Assange is a key component of the fight for all of the social and democratic rights of the working class.

It is inseparable from the fight to end militarism and war, amid preparations by the major powers for catastrophic new conflicts. It is part of the struggle to prevent the censorship of the internet by governments, as they turn to ever more authoritarian measures to suppress mass social opposition.

The millions of workers who are entering into major class battles, from France, Lebanon and Chile to Britain, the US and Australia, are the constituency for the defence of Assange, the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning and all class war prisoners.

As part of its fight to mobilise the working class in Assange’s defence, the WSWS and Socialist Equality Parties are holding a series of initiatives over the coming weeks, including rallies in Sydney and Melbourne this weekend and a public meeting in London on Sunday. We urge all supporters of democratic rights to attend.



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