

“Victories are not won through political cowardice, but in struggle”

Chris Marsden
25 February 2020

This speech was delivered by Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden to a public rally held in London on Sunday. A video of the speech can be viewed here.

Comrades and friends,

The efforts to imprison and silence Julian Assange and the struggle to defend him has already stretched over almost a decade.

It began when the frame-up was first concocted in Sweden in August 2010, leading to the Swedish international arrest warrant in November and then Assange seeking asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy on June 19, 2012.

Many of you here have been fighting to defend Assange ever since.

Tom noted that the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Equality Parties, held their first meetings on Assange in 2010 in Australia, Sri Lanka, Germany, the US and here in Britain.

Since then we have written over 700 articles specifically on Assange and over 2,000 in which he is made a point of reference in calls to oppose imperialist war, colonialism and war crimes.

On August 18, 2012, Barry Grey and myself wrote a perspective for the WSWWS, which declared:

“There is no serious legal basis for the allegations of sexual abuse against Assange... Not since the 1930s, with the triumph of fascism in much of Europe and the build-up to a second world war, has imperialism operated on the world stage with such brazen disregard for legality. Once again, the law of the jungle prevails in international relations. This is the external expression of the turn to unmitigated class war within the imperialist countries, driven by a global breakdown of the capitalist system.

“The persecution of Assange being orchestrated by the US has united a gang of cutthroats, thieves and professional liars. They are collectively the political representatives of an oligarchy whose fabulous wealth is coined from the blood, sweat and tears of countless millions throughout the world.”

Such is our record. And this was the stand on the truth taken by all those who opposed the slander campaign, the witch-hunt orchestrated by the CIA and its allies when so many others—you know who they are—abandoned him to his fate.

It has been a long and hard struggle, but it nevertheless was only preparation for the main event now underway. The opening of the extradition trial for Assange tomorrow at Woolwich Crown Court is a turning point. It means the fight is joined in earnest.

Yes, in the court itself between the judiciary, the prosecution and Assange’s legal team. And against a hostile press, which will make up the bulk of the maximum 34 places available to the entire world’s media.

It is there where the drama will be played out—before a public gallery accommodating just 24 people.

But as important as this legal fight is, the court is not the arena where Assange’s fate will ultimately be determined. If that was the case, then

there would be little hope of victory.

Assange has one of the best legal teams in the world. He has truth on his side. The case against him is a tissue of lies that runs counter to all legal and democratic norms.

He is a publisher, not a whistleblower and certainly not a hacker. He simply published information that was clearly in the public interest.

He is being pursued by a US government made up of war criminals to cover over the crimes of their predecessors in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere and to clear the path for yet greater crimes.

Assange is being charged under the Espionage Act, as if he was a spy, not a publisher and a multi-award winning journalist.

He is an Australian citizen. The US is arrogating to itself an extraterritorial power to come after foreign nationals, lock them up and throw away the key. The motive for doing so is unarguably political, meaning that the UK has no right to extradite Assange under existing law.

The treatment of Assange is not an extradition, because no crime has been committed. It is the “extraordinary rendition” of a political opponent by the Trump administration, the Pentagon and the CIA.

And if he is locked up for life, this will be no different to the treatment of the 40 plus people known to be still rotting alive in Guantanamo.

If he is given the death penalty, then it will be a state-orchestrated assassination of a journalist, just like when US Apache helicopters fired the missile that killed two Reuters war correspondents, as revealed by WikiLeaks.

These are the issues that will be argued in court, with all their chilling implications for press freedom and basic democratic rights. But one must expect, as has been proved already, that however eloquently the facts and principles are argued this will be a dialogue of the deaf.

Assange faces a kangaroo court and no one should have any faith in it.

Even the venue has been chosen to prejudice Assange’s case. Woolwich is a high security courtroom that is the preferred venue for terrorism trials.

There is a tunnel linking Belmarsh maximum security prison to the court. It remains to be seen whether Assange will be delivered to his tormentors by this route.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser will rule on the extradition proceedings that begin Monday. But the power behind the bench is still Lady Emma Arbuthnot, whose husband, James, is a Conservative MP closely connected with the armed forces and security services.

He is co-chair of the UK advisory board for defence manufacturer Thales and an advisory board member of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) for Defence and Security Studies. There are almost 2,000 references in the WikiLeaks’ database to Thales and nearly 450 to RUSI. Lord Arbuthnot is mentioned in over 50 entries.

This week we learned from Matt Kennard and Mark Curtis that Lady Arbuthnot took part in all expenses paid trips, sponsored by organisations chaired by her husband, to political and corporate partners of the Foreign Office in Spain and Turkey.

I say this not to argue for a better judge, or more transparent

proceedings, let alone to advise Assange's legal team. There are already too many barrack-room lawyers proofreading the legal case being mounted without any idea what they are talking about.

My essential point is this. If Assange's extradition is to be prevented, were Baraitser to deliver a surprise verdict or the one that many expect is overturned on appeal, then it will be because the judiciary are too scared to do otherwise.

As important as endorsements from prominent personalities, politicians and civil rights groups are in raising awareness—even ones that stayed silent for years—more is needed now than changing “public opinion.”

Success depends on mobilising the only social force that strikes fear into the hearts of the world's oligarchs, their judges, their police state apparatus, their media and their politicians—the working class.

I want to speak here about what separates our approach from that of the Don't Extradite Assange campaign.

The SEP tells the truth, even when it is awkward, uncomfortable, unpopular. Even when moral and political pressure is brought to bear urging silence. And that has been the case, particularly since the formation of the DEA, as the official campaign for Assange's freedom.

We have explained that the pseudo-left groups, including Counterfire led by John Rees, and above all Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell and the Labour “lefts” played the key role in isolating Assange and maintaining the *cordon sanitaire* placed around him by the state and the media.

This was epitomised by Corbyn's silence during the last general election, when Assange was just weeks away from facing extradition.

We were all told that discretion was required—Don't embarrass Jeremy and prevent a Labour victory, because a Corbyn government was Assange's best chance of freedom.

We know how that turned out.

Victories are not won through political cowardice, but in struggle. And there is no fight in Corbyn because he is loyal to the bureaucracy, first, last and always.

As a result of this and countless other retreats, Boris Johnson squats in Number 10, the man who declared on April 11 last year, “It's only right that Julian Assange finally faces justice. Credit to foreign office officials who worked tirelessly to secure this outcome.”

Only now have Corbyn and McDonnell come out in purely personal support for Assange.

Critical voices will be told, don't look a gift horse in the mouth, better late than never, and similar. Historically, of course, the British working class has been too forgiving, too generous to its leaders, by far. It should and will learn to be more ruthless.

Nevertheless, if Corbyn and McDonnell had now begun a systematic campaign to mobilise their albeit reduced support base in the working class, then this argument might carry more weight.

All sorts of political forces are involved in the campaign to free Assange, who we work alongside because we are not sectarian.

Moreover, Corbyn's and McDonnell's endorsement certainly helps raise Julian Assange's profile. Corbyn's video on Assange has more than a million viewings on Twitter and Facebook—underscoring what he has been sitting on for all this time.

But we will not conceal our political differences. It cannot be a case of simply letting bygones-be-bygones, because Corbyn's role and his promotion by the DEA is bound up with an attempt to channel the fight to free Assange in a direction that can only end badly.

Corbyn claims that Johnson, based on his response to questions from himself, accepts that the UK-US extradition treaty is “unbalanced” and “not a fair one.” This, he says, “is a big change by the British government.”

He advances this as a basis for pressing Johnson to take a stand against Assange's extradition.

What really happened? During Prime Minister's Questions, Corbyn first

asked Johnson about Anne Sacoolas, the CIA operative who ran down and killed Harry Dunn—calling the extradition treaty with the US “one sided” and asking whether he would commit to seeking a more “balanced extradition relationship.”

Johnson said Corbyn may have “a point” on the treaty but insisted “that is totally different from the case of Harry Dunn and Anne Sacoolas.”

When Corbyn followed up by asking whether Johnson felt Assange's “extradition should be opposed and the rights of journalists and whistle-blowers upheld,” Johnson replied that he would not comment on “any individual cases,” then claimed that his government protects “the rights of journalists and whistle-blowers.”

Johnson is Trump's ally, his creature, and a fellow warmonger. It has just been revealed that the Tories have already agreed to buy a new range of nuclear warheads for Trident from the US without even telling anyone! The UK is involved in an ongoing conspiracy with the US against Assange in pursuit of its own imperialist interests.

What change, therefore, is Corbyn speaking about? Not from Johnson, but a change of focus for Corbyn in spreading illusions in the possibility of mercy from the Tories and the courts!

McDonnell is singing the same tune, saying he will try and build a cross-party alliance to reflect the “deep doubts” in the Tory government about the unbalanced nature of the US extradition treaty! He combined this with a statement that, from tomorrow, he is constrained in even raising the issue in Parliament, let alone campaigning actively for Assange's freedom, by *sub judice* protocols.

By the time the extradition hearing resumes in May, Labour will likely be led by Sir Keir Starmer, the former Director of Public Prosecutions when the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) opposed a bail application for the WikiLeaks founder and even pressured Swedish prosecutors not to drop their “sexual misconduct” investigation in a letter warning them, “Don't get cold feet!!!”

In short, while claiming to defend Assange, Corbyn and McDonnell are covering the backs of the political scoundrels and warmongers who make up the Parliamentary Labour Party and are sowing illusions in a Tory government intent on delivering him to the war criminals in the White House and the Pentagon.

There are lessons from history in the dangers posed that must not be ignored.

Tom referred in his opening remarks to Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian anarchists framed for murder amid a massive red scare and the arrests of thousands of socialists and communists in the US.

The campaign for their freedom mobilised millions and yet, on August 23, 1927, they were put to death. A turning point in the campaign was the substitution of reliance on the organised might of the working class for a focus on appeals to the state, the progressive politicians and judiciary.

Reviewing the experience, Max Shachtman wrote:

“The defence turned more and more towards reliance upon the false friends concerned more with the vindication of ‘confidence in our institutions and their capacity to rectify errors’

“... it helped to discredit the honest and powerful class support of the toilers, the grimy and despised, the brothers of Sacco and Vanzetti, and leaned instead upon the ‘thoughtful’ editorials, the ‘impartial fairness’ and pious wishes of the liberal journals...”

“It played the soft pedal to the raucous, determined cries of the living movement of the workers and strained anxiously for ‘respectability’ and polite prayers to those honorable gentlemen who, oblivious to everything but the demand for blood, were putting the final touches to the electric chair that was to burn all life out of the two fighters.

“Because it failed or refused to understand the intensely class nature of the case, the defense succumbed to the demands of the lawyers; it exchanged the movement of the workers for the motions of the lawyers; it sold the class birth-right of Sacco and Vanzetti for a mess of liberal milk

and pap.”

We are not yet at the stage where millions of workers are involved in active struggle for Assange’s freedom. But the potential is emerging for such a development—provided it is fought for.

The political perspective advanced by the SEP must be taken up by all those seeking Assange’s freedom, all those seeking to stand against imperialist war and colonialism.

Victory can be ours because we represent the progressive forces of history.

John McDonnell is presently being denounced by the Labour right and the Zionist press for describing the trial of Assange as “the Dreyfus case of our age.”

The usual scoundrels have lined up to declare this analogy “deeply offensive.”

Mike Katz, national chair of the Jewish Labour Movement, which is staffed by Blairites, is a political creature of the Netanyahu government. In his words, Dreyfus was “a loyal soldier wrongly accused of treason because he was a Jew” while Assange is apparently “an entitled bloke who hid in a foreign embassy to evade extradition on a rape allegation.”

Assange is entitled! There is no depth to which the lackeys of British imperialism will not stoop.

Katz is on the side of the forces of reaction, seeking to denigrate a heroic and entirely innocent journalist and publisher using long discredited slanders stemming from a state frame-up. He shares nothing with Dreyfus other than his religion. His politics are closer to those who framed and imprisoned Dreyfus than the Dreyfusards who waged a titanic 12-year struggle to clear his name and free him from Devil’s Island.

That titanic conflict went well beyond the issue of Dreyfus’s personal innocence, and even beyond taking a stand against the poison of anti-Semitism.

The Dreyfusards stood for progress. The anti-Dreyfusards for blackest reaction, of which anti-Semitism provided the ideological cement.

You here are the modern Dreyfusards, whose struggle Trotsky summarised as “the fight against clericalism, against reaction, against parliamentary nepotism, against race hate and militarist hysteria, against backstage intrigues amongst the general staff, against the servility of the courts—against all the despicable forces that the powerful party of reaction could swing into motion to achieve its ends.”

And we here can say, with Emile Zola in his *J’accuse*, “It is a crime to lie to the public, to twist public opinion to insane lengths in the service of the vilest death-dealing machinations... Truth and justice, so ardently longed for! How terrible it is to see them trampled, unrecognized and ignored!”

Today human progress, the defence of democratic rights, the fight against austerity, against colonial exploitation, against militarism and war, and the re-emergence of the fascist threat, so terribly foreshadowed this week by the murderous rampage in Hanau, Germany, depends on ending the capitalist system of class exploitation that is plunging humanity towards disaster.

The ruling class, faced with rising social opposition, is turning ever more directly towards authoritarian forms of rule—police state measures backed by right-wing terror.

The international working class must be unified and mobilised against this danger in the struggle for world socialism.

In that struggle, the fight to free Julian Assange assumes immense importance.

We are not with Johnson and the Tory right against “dark forces.” The Tories are dark forces! We are with the American working class against Johnson and Trump.

The silencing of Assange and the heroic whistleblower Chelsea Manning would be a terrible blow to us all. Securing his freedom would be a victory from which many, many more would follow.

Join us going forward in that historic struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact