

“The fight for Assange’s freedom requires the political mobilisation of the working class”

Oscar Grenfell
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This speech was delivered by Oscar Grenfell, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) to a public rally in defence of Julian Assange, held in London on Sunday.

It’s a great privilege to speak at this meeting, which underscores the global character of our party’s campaign for the freedom of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and all imprisoned journalists, publishers and whistleblowers.

The events defending Assange in Britain, whether organised by the Julian Assange Defence Committee, the SEP or other organisations, have had a major impact across Australia and internationally. They’ve given expression to the immense popular sympathy for Assange here in the country that’s holding him as a political prisoner and preparing to hand him over to the war criminals in Washington.

They’ve demonstrated that on the Assange case, as on every other issue, there are two Britains—on the one hand, the official political parties, the Johnson government, the military and the intelligence agencies, and on the other, millions of workers and youth, who are entering into major struggles for their social and democratic rights.

It is the British authorities that are holding the key to Assange’s cell. But they couldn’t have trampled on his legal and democratic rights as they have, were it not for the criminal role played by successive Australian governments.

Since 2010, all of them have refused to defend Assange, despite the fact that he is a persecuted Australian citizen and journalist. Instead, they’ve been among the most enthusiastic participants in the US-led vendetta against Assange and have given succour to all the lies and smears that have been used to isolate him.

Indeed, Australian governments have been out in front when it comes to the attempts to shut WikiLeaks down. In 2009, a year before the publication of “Collateral Murder” and the Iraq and Afghan war logs, Julian revealed that he was avoiding spending time in his country of origin.

He said he’d received a tip-off that if he returned to Australia, he would be raided by the Australian Federal Police on the orders of the Labor government. The reason was that in 2009, WikiLeaks had released Labor’s secret list of blacklisted websites. The publication revealed that, contrary to government claims, the targeted websites included political and news sites that had nothing to do with illegal content—in other words, out and out political censorship.

In 2010, when WikiLeaks released the truly historic publications for which Assange has been charged, the Greens-backed Labour government of Julia Gillard reacted with unbridled hostility. Gillard fronted a press conference, in December 2010, at which she declared: “The foundation stone of the WikiLeaks organisation is an illegal act.” She pledged to aid the US authorities in their investigation of

Assange.

Gillard said this, the same time as senior US politicians were calling for Assange to be assassinated. The transparent purpose was to block any prospect of Assange’s return to Australia and to promote the lies that he was a “cyber-terrorist.” The Australian police were subsequently compelled to state that Assange and WikiLeaks, in fact, had never committed a crime under Australian law.

It should be noted that since leaving parliament, Gillard has reinvented herself as a champion of women’s rights and the battle against the mental health crisis. She has appeared at speaking events alongside Hillary Clinton, at which the two persecutors of Assange have been lauded by the corrupt representatives of the upper-middle class as feminist heroes.

The collaboration in the US-led vendetta against Assange has been continued by every Australian government since. Current conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison has declared that “no one is above the law” and that Assange must “face the music.” After he was fawned over by Donald Trump during a visit to Washington last year, an Australian reporter asked Morrison whether the two had discussed Assange. Morrison simply laughed.

The Labor Party opposition’s response has been no less criminal. Senior Labor leader Tanya Plibersek responded to Assange’s arrest on April 11 by resharing a Tweet that declared: “There are many cultists on this site, but the Assange cultists are the worst.” It branded Assange as a “foreign agent” guilty of “fascist behaviour” and “seeking to undermine democracy.” In November, Labor MPs shut down one of the only discussions of Assange’s plight in the Australian parliament over the past 12 months, using anti-democratic procedural rules.

The hostility of the Australian political and media establishment towards Assange is completely tied to their support for the US-Australian military alliance and for all of Washington’s predatory wars and military preparations.

This connection was exemplified by the Gillard government. In 2011, Gillard hosted Barack Obama, as he announced, from the floor of the Australian parliament, a massive US military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific directed against China—the so-called pivot to Asia. Gillard signed a secret military agreement with Obama, which included the establishment of a new US marine base in Northern Australia and virtually unlimited access to existing Australian bases for US troops.

This was on top of the already-existing Pine Gap spy base in central Australia. Operated by the CIA, it is involved in coordinating all US drone strikes throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Edward Snowden revealed that Pine Gap also plays a key role in mass NSA

surveillance of the world's population.

In the think tanks and foreign policy journals, it is openly discussed that Australia is on the frontline of US preparations for war with China. This agenda, imposed behind the backs of the population, has been accompanied by rafts of national security legislation, and an anti-China campaign aimed at whipping up a wartime atmosphere.

Australia's support for the persecution of Assange is also bound up with attempts by the ruling elites to suppress mounting social and political opposition. We have seen how explosive the situation is over the past months.

Almost overnight, all of the myths about Australia being the "lucky country" and the land of a "fair go" were exposed as lies by the worst bushfire crisis in decades. The fires killed 33 people and destroyed more than 2,300 homes. The catastrophe was the direct result of government funding cuts, including to firefighting services, and the refusal of every government to take any action on climate change.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who had been lauded in the financial press as someone who could bring "stability" only months before, has become a figure of mass hatred—a symbol of the contempt of the ruling elite for the lives and needs of ordinary people.

The political establishment is aware that it sits atop a social powder keg.

That's why the Australian government has been among the most aggressive in deploying the "Assange precedent."

In June last year, the Australian Federal Police raided the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the ABC. The operation was directed against journalists who had published stories revealing Australian war crimes in Afghanistan—including the killing of civilians and the desecration of corpses. The day before, the federal police raided a News Corp political editor for revealing government plans to expand mass domestic spying. In both cases, the journalists involved could face prosecution.

It is no coincidence that the raids were timed one month after the Trump administration released its Espionage Act indictment of Assange.

Last week, a federal court upheld the legality of the raid on the ABC. In language that could have been borrowed from the US indictment of Assange, the Australian judge cited as precedent a ruling which declared: "the public interest in national security necessarily outweighs the public interest in the free flow of information."

The raids followed the bipartisan passage of Foreign Interference laws in 2018. They provide for prison sentences for whistleblowers and journalists who expose "national security" material. Under the new laws, it's an offence for a journalist to even receive classified government information in an email from a whistleblower. In parliamentary submissions, WikiLeaks has warned that the legislation would threaten its own publishing activities, were it based in Australia.

As Assange has stated, the attacks against him are only the sharpest expression of a broader assault on press freedom.

Our experiences in Australia have demonstrated the essential point that is being raised at this meeting: the fight for Assange's freedom requires the political mobilisation of the working class. It's not going to be achieved through parliament or through the official political parties.

Since Assange's arrest last year, the Greens, the pseudo-left groups and the unions have done nothing to mobilise opposition to his persecution.

Many here will have seen the visit to Belmarsh Prison last week by Australian parliamentarians Andrew Wilkie and George Christensen. They are the co-chairs of a cross-party group of politicians calling for Assange to be brought home. It must be stressed that this group was formed in October. Prior to Wilkie and Christensen's British tour, it had held literally no public events or initiatives in the four months since. The MPs came here after considerable pressure was applied from defenders of Assange and democratic rights.

Their visit was only a pale reflection of the immense support that exists for Assange among workers and young people. I want to provide just a few examples:

Earlier this month, a petition demanding freedom for Assange was tabled in parliament. It has been signed by over 280,000 people, making it one of the largest in the 110-years of Australian parliamentary history.

Last week, the Hills association of Sydney schools passed a motion, which declared: "We insist that the federal Morrison government use its diplomatic powers to organise the safe return of Assange to Australia. We resolve to send this resolution to other schools and workplaces." The committee which passed the resolution represents 1,300 teachers.

Their action followed the passage of a motion by teachers at a working-class school in Melbourne late last year demanding freedom for Assange. It won an international response, being featured on Jimmy Dore's popular online show.

For so many years, support for Assange has been suppressed, but now it is coming to the surface, and we can anticipate that it will grow substantially over the coming weeks and months.

I want to finish by citing a comment made by Terry Hicks to the WWS last year in support of Assange. Terry's son, David, was arrested by the US military in Afghanistan in 2001. He was taken to Guantanamo Bay and subjected to torture, despite the fact that he was guilty of no crime.

For years, Terry waged a one-man campaign for his son's freedom. In the end, he built a powerful grassroots movement that forced the Australian government to take action to have David Hicks released from Guantanamo Bay and returned to Australia.

Terry said: "You might get support from high profile people, but the fight to gain Julian's freedom depends on ordinary people speaking out. You will win them if you explain the basic issues at stake, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and democratic rights, and you'll be respected for your determination and your honesty.

"Always remember that the story constantly alters for those who lie, but if you're telling the truth then nothing changes, and the real story will eventually come out."

Those are fine words as we begin the next stage in the fight for Julian Assange's freedom.



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