Jeremy Corbyn's criminal silence during Julian Assange's extradition hearing

Chris Marsden
2 March 2020

Last week, Julian Assange was subjected to an extradition hearing brought by the Trump administration to bring the WikiLeaks founder to the United States to face Espionage Act charges carrying a 175-year prison sentence.

Throughout the four-day proceedings in London, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his closest allies, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, along with every single Labour MP, kept their mouths firmly shut. Their silence was tantamount to collusion in a monstrous political show trial, aimed at silencing a publisher and journalist who has exposed US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Assange's defence team detailed Washington's conspiracy to silence him by any means necessary. The proceedings also revealed how the British courts and Boris Johnson's Conservative government are prepared to trample on basic democratic and legal rights to ensure that Assange is sent to the US and silenced forever.

The extradition hearing had a Kafkaesque character. On February 24, Assange took his seat at Belmarsh Magistrates' Court in a bulletproof glass box. He could barely hear his legal team outlining his defence against extradition. The bulk of the world's press, stuck in a porta-cabin grandly described as a "media annexe," could also barely hear or follow events.

For the defence, Edward Fitzgerald QC made a powerful presentation insisting that the US extradition request was illegal because it was demonstrably politically motivated. He detailed the extraordinary level of criminality involved in the US vendetta against Assange, including the methods employed by Spanish security firm US Global on behalf of the CIA to monitor every movement of the award-winning journalist during his political asylum inside the Ecuadorian Embassy.

Private and privileged conversations between Assange and his lawyers and doctors were filmed, even in the toilet, so that he was forced to sleep in a tent in his bedroom to protect his privacy.

More devastating still were the revelations of an unnamed Spanish whistle-blower, "witness 2," that the US had plotted to kidnap and possibly kill Assange.

"There were conversations" between the CIA and UC Global head David Morales "about whether there should be more extreme measures contemplated, such as kidnapping or poisoning Julian Assange in the embassy," Fitzgerald told the court. This included suggesting that the embassy door could be left open to make a kidnapping look like it could have been "an accident."

Day two began with reports that Assange was handcuffed 11 times and stripped naked twice by prison guards on the opening day of proceedings, while his legal documents were confiscated. He was moved to five different cells. Despite this grotesque interference in the right to a fair trial, presiding judge Vanessa Baraitser declared that she had "no jurisdiction" over Assange's treatment in detention.

The next day, she informed the court that Assange was "medicated" and might have "difficulty following proceedings." In response, Assange approached the glass panels separating him from the body of the court, telling the head of his legal team, Gareth Peirce, that he was under constant surveillance: "I cannot communicate with my lawyers or ask them for clarifications without the other side seeing… What is the point of asking if I can concentrate if I cannot participate?"

The defence requested that Assange be allowed to sit in the body of the court, but Baraitser rejected their written submissions, ruling on the final afternoon that Assange must remain in a dock encased in reinforced glass when the hearing resumes in May.

Fitzgerald cited the medical opinion of Professor Michael Kopelman that, "I am as confident as a psychiatrist can ever be that, if extradition to the United

© World Socialist Web Site

States were to become imminent, Mr. Assange would find a way of suiciding," and of Doctor Sondra Crosby that, "It is my strong medical opinion that the extradition of Mr. Assange to the United States will further damage his current fragile state of health and very likely cause his death."

This is the corrupt and depraved British legal system that Corbyn, McDonnell, et. al. refuse to challenge. Their public rationalisations are politically criminal.

On February 20, McDonnell visited Assange at Belmarsh. He called Assange's plight "the Dreyfus case of our age." At the same time, he insisted that "when the hearings start they will be sub judice and it will be difficult to raise it in the House of Commons…"

McDonnell was advancing the contemptible rationale which he and Corbyn—and their pseudo-left political allies—would use to justify their own cowardice and lack of political principle.

Jeremy Corbyn is the leader of the Opposition. He could have raised Assange's fate in Parliament every single day, informing millions that he was being tried in a kangaroo court and that his fundamental democratic rights were being abused by a judge whose verdict has been decided in advance. He should have called for every worker and young person in Britain and internationally to demand an immediate end to the legal travesty at Belmarsh and for Assange to be freed.

What would the courts have done in response? Threaten him with prosecution or arrest? A genuine workers' leader would have told the judiciary, "Just you dare try it!"

If any action had been taken against Corbyn, this would have been the most incendiary move since Charles I entered Parliament in January 1642 seeking to arrest five members of the Commons and precipitating the English Civil War. It would have unleashed a wave of protest throughout the UK that would have galvanised mass support for Assange's freedom.

But Corbyn and McDonnell are not only too fond of their own skins to throw down the gauntlet to the judiciary. They are servants of the same capitalist masters as Baraitser and are bitterly opposed to any mobilisation of the working class to thwart the machinations of British imperialism.

Corbyn kept quiet on Assange for years after becoming Labour leader, until April last year when Assange was illegally dragged out of the Ecuadorean Embassy. He briefly opposed extradition to the US, before supporting extradition to Sweden on manufactured sex allegations. He then resumed his silence for 10 months, including during December's general election campaign, before again breaking it briefly on February 12.

The media barely and selectively reported last week's trial. Over the weekend, Socialist Equality Party campaign teams in the UK found that many workers and youth did not even know it was taking place. Corbyn is politically responsible for this dangerous situation.

Against the efforts of the official Don't Extradite Assange campaign, and its political leaders such as John Rees and Tariq Ali, the *World Socialist Web Site*, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties have warned repeatedly that Assange's freedom cannot be won by relying on such false political friends as Corbyn and McDonnell or by extending the slightest confidence to Britain's courts. As we wrote on February 13:

"Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader has been an object lesson in the impossibility of fighting for democratic rights and against war by supporting or peddling illusions in the Labour Party and its 'left' representatives. It has demonstrated that the fight to block Assange's extradition, secure his freedom and defend civil liberties requires the development of an independent movement of the working class—the vast majority of the population—directed against the entire official political set-up."

We appeal to our readers to contact the WSWS and take part in the global campaign to free Julian Assange and heroic whistle-blower Chelsea Manning. Meetings must be called in every workplace, school, college and university demanding Assange's and Manning's immediate and unconditional freedom, the withdrawal of the US extradition request and full compensation for the decade-long state vendetta against them. Their lives depend on the intervention of the working class. There is no time to lose.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site