

Australian workers and youth demand freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporters
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There is substantial opposition to the ongoing imprisonment of Julian Assange in London's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, after Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against his extradition to the US at the beginning of the year.

The British verdict was narrowly based on Assange's acute health issues, resulting from his decade-long persecution, and the oppressive nature of the US prison system. Baraitser upheld all of the anti-democratic arguments of US prosecutors, which aim to criminalise any journalism based on "national security" disclosures. The US Justice Department is appealing the judgement, as it continues the campaign to extradite Assange for exposing American war crimes, human rights violations and diplomatic conspiracies.

Days after her verdict, Baraitser rejected a bail application, despite the fact that Assange is only being detained in Britain to facilitate the extradition request, which she had denied. This punitive measure, imperiling the WikiLeaks founder with further medical damage and the threat of coronavirus infection, again demonstrates that the British state wants Assange dead.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison responded to the extradition ruling by again declaring that his government would do nothing to defend Assange, despite the fact that he is an Australian citizen and journalist. This is a continuation of the decades-long complicity of Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, in the abrogation of Assange's rights.

In contrast to the hostility of the official parties and the silence of most of the corporate media, there is substantial support for Assange among workers and young people.

Sofia, a law student at Monash University in Melbourne, told the WSWS: "I was initially somewhat surprised that they ruled against the extradition, but then I read more deeply into it and realised it was only in regard to his mental health. The court completely rejected any assertion that there was political motivation behind the extradition, or that he wouldn't face a fair trial in the US. They denied that he could claim protection for freedom of speech or freedom of the press under the European Convention on Human Rights—which is actually quite an extensive human rights act as they go.

"He now has to go through the [US Department of Justice] appeal and that might be ruled against him. So, it is actually a bad precedent because this is a very individual case where his

mental health has been so damaged by his treatment that he would likely commit suicide in a US prison. The outcome is positive, but the means to get there is not so good.

"Investigative journalists are being targeted everywhere. Even in our own country, ABC offices were raided over Afghan war crimes stories, a Newscorp journalist's home was raided and the government has passed laws against whistleblowers. Taking a step back and looking at it, it's obvious that what's at stake is freedom to hold governments to account, freedom of information, freedom to dissent, all these things that we're nominally meant to have in the most 'democratic' countries in the world. It is worrying and it is symptomatic of a bigger crisis in these capitalist and imperialist countries.

"The complicity of the Australian government and official political parties is symptomatic of their serving the interests of Australian capitalism, which is in turn subservient to US imperialism, rather than serving their own people, of whom Assange is one, as an Australian citizen. The fact that they're ignoring him and not providing any assistance, that they would normally provide a citizen overseas, is a result of the battle between being the US's lackey and furthering the interests of Australians generally—it is always going to be the former that wins out. It just shows where their priorities are.

"It has to be a grassroots movement from below to save Assange. A mass movement or mass support for him—rather than trying to appeal to the goodness of Australian politicians' hearts."

Sneha, a political economy student in Sydney, commented: "The ruling against Julian Assange's extradition was on mental health grounds rather than a recognition of the right to free speech. As such, it was an assault on democratic rights and freedom of the press.

"The ruling class fears Assange because of the depth of what he uncovered—the war logs and diplomatic cables—but also they are trying to make an example of him.

"What's happened with Assange and whistleblowers, even US COVID-19 data scientist Rebekah Jones, can't be seen in isolation from increasingly authoritarian forms of rule in the US and globally. With capitalism in crisis, social inequality and class antagonisms are at an acute point. The turn to

authoritarianism is the only resort of the ruling class. America is trying to preserve its hegemonic power, which will lead to war. The attacks on journalists have a lot to do with suppressing the anti-war sentiment of the public. The ruling elite is trying to instill fear in people and force them to be quiet.

“The Australian government has been completely indifferent to Assange’s treatment, claiming ‘it’s up to the courts,’ when clearly those trials were show trials. Australia is closely tied to US foreign policy and is an aggressor itself. The comparison between the treatment of Assange and those responsible for the war crimes in Afghanistan, documented by the recent Brereton Report, is like night and day.

“The Australian government and media have tried to downplay those war crimes as an aberration from otherwise peaceful and disciplined military forces. That narrative doesn’t work anymore. Assange has shed so much light on it.

“Julian Assange can only be freed through a mass movement of the working class, which can’t be separated from the fight for socialism. That is the only way to salvage democracy.”

Caroline, a retired teacher, stated: “Julian Assange is an Australian citizen and he should be getting help from the prime minister, who should be standing up for him. He is entitled to protection from Australia. Why is he in London? He is a journalist. He has won a Walkley Award. If he found out about war crimes and did not report them, then he would be complicit. But he has reported crimes. There’s freedom of speech. If Julian Assange cannot speak freely, then what about the rest of us?”

Lachlan, a University of Newcastle student, said: “I thought the verdict on Assange was strange, honestly. The major thing is that if the judge has actually said he can’t be extradited. It begs the question, why is he still in prison? If there is no legal justification in sending him to America, why can’t he be brought back to Australia? A lot of mental health experts and professionals have looked at his conditions and have come to the conclusion that he has been treated horrendously, and has put him in a state where he can’t continue his life in prison.

“This is made all the worse by the fact that COVID-19 is in the prison system in the UK. The government there is basically just allowing prisoners to get the virus. It is quite brutal and medieval. I absolutely condemn the actions of the UK, the US and Australian governments in allowing this to happen.”

Frank, a semi-retired professional and long-standing supporter of Assange, added: “The extradition verdict is designed to further question Assange’s sanity and hence his credibility as an adversary. Clearly, a smear in the foreground with the main intent to dissuade other investigative journalists from attempting to emulate, in any way, his work.

“The matter of Australia’s sycophantic relationship with the US is too large a topic to go into here. Suffice to say that the clear evidence of the Australian political establishment’s treatment and lack of support for David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib [Australian citizens who were imprisoned by the US at

Guantanamo Bay], was a prelude to their present abandonment of Assange. The school bully will always have his sycophants. They are, of course, aided and abetted by an extremely compliant press, correctly described as stenographers for the state.”

Rebecca, a worker in Townsville, commented: “It’s good that the court ruled against extradition, but the reason his mental health has deteriorated to this point is because he has been persecuted and arbitrarily detained for the past decade. Not granting bail was disgraceful. I read that Julian’s partner said that it’s freezing cold in the Belmarsh Prison, which just shows the continued torture of Julian Assange.”

Rebecca condemned the role of successive governments. “I initially had hopes in Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, when she was installed in 2010, but she was repulsive towards refugees and she falsely declared that Julian was guilty of crimes for publishing the truth,” Rebecca recalled.

A worker at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) responded: “The decision by Judge Vanessa Baraitser to block the extradition of Julian Assange to the USA is an historic victory for Assange, his legal team and supporters throughout the world. However, with his application for bail denied, Assange is in more danger today than he has ever been, with coronavirus sweeping through Belmarsh Prison.

“Moreover, Baraitser’s ruling was carefully crafted so as to endorse every attack on democratic rights made by the US government. As an employee of the ABC, which was raided by the police in 2019, I am all too aware of the danger that the Assange precedent represents.

“Every Australian government has demonstrated—through their active collaboration in the persecution of the award-winning journalist— their contempt for democratic rights. This started with Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, whose installation was exposed by WikiLeaks as being the work of ‘protected sources’ of the US embassy. The fact that the current Morrison government has stood by, when an Australian citizen is on the brink of death, proves that they will stop at nothing in their commitment to the US alliance.”



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