

Australian Labor Party conference passes mealy-mouthed motion “defending” Assange

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Political conferences often adopt motions to draw attention to an issue and to publicly signal, whether sincerely or otherwise, that they will take action to address it.

A motion referencing WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, passed at the Australian Labor Party’s special platform conference late last month, served a very different purpose. Its function was to formalise Labor’s refusal to take any concrete action in defence of the persecuted Australian citizen and journalist, while providing a sop to his supporters based on a few weasel-words of concern.

Far from publicising Assange’s plight, everything was done to keep the motion a secret. It was passed as part of a package of resolutions, and so was not discussed or even mentioned at any point during the two-day conference. Since then it has not been publicly listed anywhere as being among the resolutions passed by the conference, placed on any Labor website, referenced by a single prominent Labor parliamentarian or reported by any corporate media outlet.

The existence of the motion was only revealed when federal Labor backbencher Julian Hill made reference to it during an interview with *Consortium News* published on April 12, either twelve or thirteen days after it had been adopted.

Hill absurdly touted the fact that the motion had been passed “unanimously,” even though many people attending the conference knew nothing about it. “As the alternative government of the country,” Hill said, “Labor has made our position clear now.” The “policy position of the leader of the opposition, the alternative Prime Minister” Anthony Albanese, was for the prosecution of Assange “to be dropped.”

After Hill’s comments, the motion was hailed by a number of Assange supporters as an important step forward in the fight for his freedom.

The WSWs contacted the Labor backbencher’s office, to ask for a copy. Its contents indicate that Hill’s claims for the motion were exceedingly generous. To be blunt, Hill is carrying water for Albanese and a Labor leadership that has not the slightest intention of defending Assange. In full, the motion states:

“Labor believes that the Australian government should be doing everything necessary to ensure that Mr Julian Assange is treated fairly and humanely, and welcomes the priority given to

the health and welfare of Mr Assange in the UK Court’s decision. This includes ensuring that under no circumstances should Mr Assange—or any Australian—face the death penalty.

“The UK Court has found that Mr Assange should not be extradited to the USA given his ill-health, and Labor believes it is now time for this long drawn out case against Julian Assange to be brought to an end.”

In other words, Labor’s “policy position” is to take no position on the US attempt to prosecute Assange under the Espionage Act for publishing evidence of American war crimes, human rights violations and diplomatic conspiracies.

Civil liberties organisations, United Nations (UN) officials, corporate publications and a number of political leaders have gone on record to state their opposition to such a prosecution. But even a pro forma condemnation of the unprecedented bid to convict a journalist for publishing true information about government illegality was a bridge too far for Labor.

The motion does not demand anything of anybody, from the Biden administration, which has signalled that it will proceed with the attempt to prosecute Assange, to the British authorities, who are keeping him imprisoned to facilitate the American extradition request, or the Australian government, which has done nothing to defend a persecuted citizen.

Nor does the motion condemn any of the participants in the decade-long campaign against Assange. The only party referenced is the British judiciary. It is presented in the most glowing of terms, as having shown a great commitment to Assange’s “health and welfare.”

This description is the stuff of George Orwell’s novel, *1984*.

At every step, the British judiciary, acting in collaboration with US and British governments and the intelligence agencies, has been the direct instrument of Assange’s persecution. It spearheaded opposition to his political asylum, including after it had been upheld by the UN; sanctioned his illegal April 2019 arrest in Ecuador’s London embassy, and has since kept him confined to Belmarsh Prison, a maximum-security facility dubbed Britain’s “Guantánamo Bay.”

For the past two years, the Australian government and Labor have insisted that they cannot intervene to assist Assange, aside from providing worthless “consular support,” because of their respect for the British legal system. The government and Labor

have ignored or blithely dismissed the findings of UN Rapporteur Nils Melzer that Assange's ongoing confinement constitutes torture, as well as warnings from hundreds of doctors that he could die if he is not immediately released.

Only now that a British court has handed down a ruling on the US extradition has Labor come out with a motion, and one that still upholds the authority of the British courts. In her January verdict Judge Vanessa Baraitser blocked Assange's dispatch to his American persecutors on the narrow grounds that his poor health, and the draconian conditions in US prisons, meant he would likely commit suicide if extradited.

Baraitser upheld all of the anti-democratic arguments of the US, including their right to prosecute journalists, which Labor also does not challenge. The narrow ruling means that Assange's plight remains highly precarious, and sets a precedent for sweeping attacks on press freedom.

And far from the touching concern for the WikiLeaks founder's "health and welfare" claimed by Labor, Baraitser, several days after the extradition judgement, rejected a bail application for Assange. This means that he is indefinitely confined to a COVID-infested maximum-security prison, without having been convicted of any crime, and solely on the basis of an extradition request that was rejected by the first court in which it was heard. Meanwhile, the US prosecutors prepare their appeal.

Anyone who thinks that the motion represents a commitment by Labor to fight for Assange's freedom is deluding themselves. While Labor treated its mealy-mouthed reference to Assange as a state secret, it trumpeted other resolutions passed by the conference.

The two key policy planks of the conference were that Labor would be better placed than the Liberal-Nationals to implement sweeping austerity measures demanded by big business, and to collaborate with the Biden administration as it steps up preparations for war, including against China.

No fewer than six motions repeated Biden's hypocritical "human rights" condemnations of Beijing, aimed at legitimising US military aggression, while there was no mention at all of American imperialism's continuous wars of the past 30 years, backed by successive Australian governments. Union speakers called for a boost to Australian military manufacturing to prepare for conflict and Labor leaders hailed their record as the party that had overseen Australian involvement in the world wars of the twentieth century.

To imagine that a party of imperialism and the banks is about to defend a journalist who exposed war crimes, at the very point it is making a pro-war pitch to Washington and the Australian ruling elite, is absurd on its face. The very fact that Labor has kept its motion secret, demonstrates that it has no intention of taking action. Instead, tepid statements of concern will be wheeled out to placate the widespread support for Assange among workers and young people

The attitude that a Labor government would take to Assange is, moreover, not a hypothetical matter. As the WSWS has previously noted:

"In 2009, WikiLeaks published the then Labor government's secret blacklist of banned websites. This refuted claims that only criminal sites were blocked, and exposed significant internet censorship. Labor communications minister Stephen Conroy threatened to refer the publication to the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Assange later stated he was fearful that Labor was preparing police raids against him.

"In 2010, WikiLeaks released US army war logs from Iraq and Afghanistan documenting historic war crimes and exposing the neo-colonial character of the occupations. Towards the end of the year, it published 250,000 US diplomatic cables, revealing the daily intrigues of American imperialism, from coup plots, to interference operations and illegal spying on heads of state and United Nations officials.

"As senior US politicians responded by calling for Assange to be jailed, or even assassinated, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard joined the chorus. She slanderously declared that the 'foundation stone of the WikiLeaks organisation is an illegal act.' This assertion, subsequently contradicted by the AFP, prefigured the US attempts to prosecute Assange for the 2010 publications.

"Gillard considered stripping Assange of his Australian passport, in violation of domestic law, and pledged to help the US intelligence agencies in their campaign to destroy WikiLeaks. This stance set the pattern for every government since, which has continued to deny Assange's rights as an Australian citizen and journalist."

Gillard's stance was inextricably tied to her Greens-backed government's support for US militarism, including a troop surge in Afghanistan and the initiation of a major military-build up in the Asia-Pacific targeting China. A decade on, and with the war plans even more advanced, a Labor government would be no less hostile to the exposures of militarism that Assange personifies.

Defenders of Assange and WikiLeaks should turn to the working class, the social force that is being propelled into struggle by the crisis of capitalism, and that opposes war and defends democratic rights. Those who promote Labor's weasel-words are boosting a party that has, and will continue to play, a central role in the persecution of Assange.



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