

Jeremy Corbyn and the political dead-end of the official Don't Extradite Assange Campaign

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Wednesday's hearing on Julian Assange's extradition marked the ignominious collapse of the political perspective pursued by the official Don't Extradite Assange (DEA) campaign.

This perspective was summed up outside the court by former leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn. Speaking to a small group of protesters, Corbyn said of the WikiLeaks founder, "We have someone who in a different country, in a different world in a different denomination would be seen as a hero by the West for exposing truths somewhere. Journalists expose truths all over the world and they should all be supported in exposing those truths."

The difference with Assange is that he had exposed truths that "embarrassed" the United States. "My view," Corbyn continued, "is that he should be released."

Speaking to journalists, Corbyn also expressed his "hopes" in the High Court and issued moral appeals to Conservative UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden, saying it was "disappointing" that Biden was continuing the efforts of the Trump administration to extradite Assange.

What does this say about the DEA's campaign?

Corbyn wants to portray Assange as just another journalist exposing truths that are unfortunately embarrassing to the US. But Assange carried out some of the most significant exposures of war crimes perpetrated by US imperialism and its allies, above all British imperialism, in history. He described WikiLeaks as an "intelligence agency of the people" dedicated to opposing such crimes, famously commenting, "If war can be started by lies, peace can be started by truth."

WikiLeaks revelations sparked a global wave of anti-imperialist sentiment and contributed to the Arab Spring. The ruling class recognised a mortal enemy and responded with a ruthless campaign to destroy Assange, which it has waged consistently for a decade, setting a dictatorial precedent for the persecution of its opponents in preparation for new crimes.

To reduce this to mere embarrassment is to deliberately conceal political realities to reinforce the claim that Biden and Johnson can be persuaded by moral pressure to change course.

But Corbyn made his pathetic appeals outside a hearing to determine on what basis the appeal for Assange to be extradited by Biden's State Department can proceed. And Britain's judiciary made clear that they, like the Johnson government, are intent on facilitating Biden's efforts.

All five of the US's grounds for appeal against the ruling prohibiting Assange's extradition were upheld—collectively bringing into question Judge Vanessa Baraitser's conclusion that Assange's mental health would make him a suicide risk should he be sent to the US and kept in its brutal penal system.

It should be noted that the same agenda has been pursued by the DEA for months, first appealing to Donald Trump and the fascistic elements gravitating to him to pardon Assange before moving seamlessly on to moral appeals directed to the incoming Biden administration.

This has been accompanied by efforts to emphasise the tragic element of Assange's separation from his wife, Stella Moris, and their two young children. For Assange's 50th birthday, his tenth in effective or actual detention, the DEA organised a picnic on Parliament Square, complete with birthday cake and string quartet.

This sentimental appeal naturally fell on deaf ears, with the prosecution using the fact that Assange concealed the relationship with Moris to protect his loved ones to accuse the key defence expert medical witness Professor Kopelman of himself misleading the court about Assange's mental health.

The same false orientation holds true of Corbyn's efforts to reduce Assange to just another journalist, in line with the DEA's focus on securing the backing of the media.

Most media groups and their journalists do not "expose truths" but disseminate official propaganda—which is why Assange was subjected to a press slander campaign for years and his appalling treatment either justified or ignored. Even now the clear threat posed to press freedoms by Assange's prosecution under the Espionage Act have evoked only the most muted response in the editorial offices of the major dailies.

Corbyn's statements betray a class agenda which is toxic to the fight for Assange's freedom. He avoids any reference to the social struggle between the working class and imperialism with which Assange's case is inextricably bound up and instead seeks to secure his freedom by attempting to make him palatable to layers of the "progressive" middle class and, through them, to win the ear of the political establishment.

But for the most part the "progressive" middle class, the social types that occupy the editorial offices of the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, Labour and Democratic Party politicians, trade union leaders, liberal academia, feminists, and above all the various

pseudo-left groups, have either kept silent on Assange or remain openly hostile to him.

And it should not need saying that because Assange's life's work has been dedicated to the exposure of imperialist crimes, there is nothing that will make him a sympathetic figure in the eyes of the ruling class in Britain or America.

There is nothing impermissible in seeking the support of journalists, NGOs, celebrities, and even bourgeois politicians for Assange's freedom, but only as a by-product of a popular campaign to secure support from the one social force that can actually bring an end to his persecution—the international working class.

The DEA makes no appeal to the working class whatsoever, or to any broader layers of the population. It has produced a near hermetically sealed campaign of more or less prominent individuals, held in high regard by each other, who attend each other's events, and repost each other's comments. Not one of them conducts any struggle among workers to clarify the issues raised by Assange's persecution, or to mobilise them in his defence.

Yanis Varoufakis, the founder of Diem25 who played an instrumental role as Syriza's finance minister in betraying the struggle by Greek workers against austerity, displayed his own contempt and that of his co-thinkers for the working class at a DEA event last year.

Assange's "worst enemy", he said, was "people too tired, too exhausted, too disheartened by working zero-hour contracts or whatever to be able to expend the energy" to fight for his freedom. The same held true for "people who are neither good nor bad working in these offices in Whitehall," the home of Britain's civil service. But as regards these government functionaries, he insisted, "We have to make them care."

To the extent that there is a belief among Assange's supporters that such high-profile figures offer a route to broader masses of people, this is entirely misplaced.

Corbyn made clear that he only attended Wednesday's protest in a personal capacity, and brought no one else to it. He did not mention Labour, his own party, let alone call on its members to back Assange, studiously avoiding the subject as he does in every public appearance.

Nor did he make even a personal appeal to his 2.4 million followers on Twitter, either before or after the protest outside the court. His tweets from the day were to give "Solidarity and best wishes" to the family and friends of a British solicitor lost mountaineering, to plug Momentum's World Transformed event, and to extend "Solidarity with students" protesting climate change inaction outside the Department for Education. The one personal event he recorded was a visit to "a new cooperative for ethical food delivery" he made after leaving the Assange protest.

None of this is oversight. Corbyn has published only eight tweets on Assange in his account's history. They provide a timeline of his rotten record on the WikiLeaks founder's case.

His first tweet was made in December 2010, saying "USA and others don't like any scrutiny via wikileaks and they are leaning on everybody to pillory Assange. What happened to free speech?" There is then a two-year gap until Corbyn mentions Assange again

in 2012. By far the longest silence then begins, after Assange is falsely accused of sexual assault in Sweden, and only broken in 2019. This silence covers the majority of Corbyn's period as leader of the largest political party in Europe.

After issuing one tweet on April 11, 2019, on the day Assange was dragged from the Ecuadorian embassy in London by the British police, saying his extradition "should be opposed by the British government", Corbyn retreated once again before an onslaught by the Labour right-wing, stating two days later that he only opposed extradition to the US and that Assange should answer the sexual assault allegations in Sweden. He did not mention Assange's name again, in any medium, for the entirety of the 2019 general election campaign.

The next tweet opposing extradition comes in February 2020, during the twilight of his Labour leadership, and the next four a year later in January, June and July 2021, promoting token initiatives by the Council of Europe and the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs.

What does a political figure like this offer in the fight for Assange's freedom? Corbyn gave the answer on Wednesday—appeals to the media, the British judiciary, Johnson and Biden.

Joining Corbyn outside the court on Wednesday, pseudo-left group Counterfire's John Rees, the leading figure in the DEA campaign, stated that Assange's "case has finally reached a serious court"—as if a purely legal approach backed by moral pressure can now finally secure his freedom and the lessons of the pseudo-legal vendetta waged against Assange for the past ten years can be dismissed. As his ally Tariq Ali told a DEA meeting in February 2020, "Hopefully as the case moves upwards to superior courts, we will find some judges who are prepared just to be decent."

Nothing is left of this perspective. The Biden administration continues to seek Assange, the British courts are supporting its efforts and the WikiLeaks founder's situation is increasingly desperate. If extradition to the US is to be prevented, now is the time for working people to intervene on his behalf. The fight for Julian Assange's freedom is a fight against imperialist war and in defence of fundamental democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party in Britain, its sister parties, and the World Socialist Web Site call on all our supporters and readers to contact us and take up this struggle in earnest.



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