

The fight to free Julian Assange and to defeat Australia's anti-democratic electoral laws are linked

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In August, the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor opposition joined hands to ram through anti-democratic electoral laws, which are aimed at deregistering so-called minor parties—those without parliamentary representation. By tripling the membership requirement for parties to be registered, from 500 to 1,500, in the midst of a pandemic, Labor and the Coalition are seeking to clear the ballot in the lead-up to a federal election.

The consequence, if the laws are not defeated, will be an even-greater narrowing of political discussion because both major parties agree on all the fundamental issues, from supporting US-led wars and military preparations, attacking the jobs and social rights of workers while providing massive handouts to the banks, placing profits before health and safety in the pandemic and assaulting democratic rights. With the electoral laws, they are seeking to ensure that all these issues, and every other affecting the lives and interests of working people, are buried.

The same is the case when it comes to WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. Labor, the Coalition and the entire political establishment support the persecution of Assange, either openly or tacitly. They have abandoned an Australian citizen and journalist who is being persecuted for exposing US-led war crimes, mass spying operations and global diplomatic conspiracies.

Assange is imprisoned in Britain's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison and faces extradition to the US, where he would be imprisoned for life or worse for publishing the truth about the criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, bringing to light US coup-plotting and support for corrupt dictators the world over, and revealing the torture of innocent people in Guantanamo Bay.

The US pursuit of Assange has already been exposed as

a lawless and vindictive campaign, most recently with the revelation that in 2017, the American Central Intelligence Agency and the Trump administration discussed illegally kidnapping Assange or even assassinating him.

Labor and the Coalition, having supported the US campaign against WikiLeaks, have done nothing to defend Assange through all of the unprecedented attacks against his legal, democratic and human rights.

One function of their electoral laws is to ensure that Assange's plight, and the broader assault on civil liberties, of which it is a key component, is passed over in silence at the next federal election and every election after it.

This is not a hypothetical question. The last federal election, in 2019, was held just months after Assange was dragged out of Ecuador's London embassy, where he was an internationally-recognised political refugee, illegally arrested by the British police and then charged by the US government for his publishing activities.

By all rights, this onslaught against an Australian publisher and journalist, the country's most famous political prisoner, should have been front and centre of discussion during the 2019 election. But the parliamentary parties worked together to ensure that this was not the case.

The wall of silence extended from Labor and the Coalition, to right-wing populist parties and the Greens.

Individual Greens MPs have occasionally shed crocodile tears over Assange's plight, but the party has opposed calls, including from within its own ranks, for a public, party campaign demanding his freedom. Instead, in 2019, as they will at the next election, the Greens focused on appeals for a coalition with Labor and even the Liberals, reflecting their character as a pro-business party of the affluent and complacent upper-middle class.

It is a matter of record that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was the only party in the 2019 election that fought to make central the defence of Assange in its campaign. The SEP did this, not only because the defence of political prisoners is an elementary component of socialist and democratic politics, but because Assange's plight is so closely connected to the social and democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

With their persecution of Assange, the US government, and all those supporting it, are seeking to establish a precedent for frame-ups, victimisations and even political assassinations, directed against the growing social and political opposition from the working class.

That point, stressed by the SEP in the 2019 election, has only become clearer since. The world's population is passing through an unprecedented pandemic, during which capitalist governments everywhere, including in Australia, have adopted homicidal policies allowing the virus to spread, so that maximum corporate profit-making activities can resume, whatever the toll in death and illness.

The pandemic, moreover, has accelerated all of the underlying tendencies of the capitalist system, in its period of decay and crisis. Governments are ramping up a militarist agenda, spearheaded by the US preparations for a catastrophic conflict against China, which is fully supported by the Australian ruling elite and all of its political parties.

And the drive to war abroad is being accompanied by a war against the democratic and social rights of the working class at home, as jobs, wages and conditions are all being torn up by governments, big business and the corporatised trade unions.

This is a program that cannot be implemented democratically. That is why governments around the world are resorting to ever more authoritarian forms of rule, and are doing everything they can to suppress information and keep the public in the dark.

In Australia, virtually every week, the Coalition and Labor join hands to pass new legislation directed against civil liberties, whether by expanding the surveillance powers of the police and the intelligence agencies, undermining online freedom and privacy or stripping even more rights from immigrants and refugees. This, on top of the more than 100 bills and amendments restricting democratic rights, pushed through during the past twenty years, on the bogus pretext of the "war on terror."

It is within this political context that Australia's parliamentary parties support the persecution of Assange,

and seek to suppress any political alternative to their program of war, austerity and dictatorship.

The motivation behind the assault on Assange, and the anti-democratic electoral laws is the same. To silence dissident voices, intimidate popular opposition and shore-up the position of a bankrupt corporate and political elite that is widely-despised by millions of working people and that feels itself besieged from all sides.

And both the Assange case and the electoral laws are providing an object lesson in how democratic rights can be defended, and to which social force supporters of civil liberties must turn. All of those parties that base themselves on the parliamentary set-up, and defend the existing capitalist social order, refuse to defend Assange, mobilise opposition to the electoral laws, or fight for anything.

The SEP has taken a lead on both issues, because it is independent of the political establishment, opposes the domination of society by the corporate and financial oligarchy, a state of affairs incompatible with democratic rights, and is oriented to the working class.

It is the working class that is the ultimate target of all onslaughts on democratic rights, and the social force which can defeat them. All over the world, workers are entering into struggle to defend their basic rights, on the question of living standards, jobs, a pandemic policy based on public health and science, and opposition to war.

The freedom of Assange and the defence of civil rights must be emblazoned on the banner of all these struggles and connected to the fight for a genuinely democratic society in which wealth and political power are in the hands of the working class. This is the perspective of the SEP.

Join its campaign against the electoral laws here.



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