

Australian government, Labor wash their hands of Assange amid imminent extradition threat

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23 April 2022

With the order for Julian Assange's extradition to the US, issued by a British Magistrates Court last week, the WikiLeaks founder is closer than ever before to being bundled onto a plane and buried in a US supermax prison, from which he would never emerge.

His case has been sent to British Home Secretary Priti Patel, whose right-wing, militarist government will rubberstamp the order. There are provisions for a further appeal by Assange. But the actions of the British judiciary over the past decade show that nothing can be taken for granted. There is every possibility that Assange's right to appeal will be denied, as it was by the Supreme Court on a different point of law last month.

Assange has four weeks to make representations to Patel before she signs off on the extradition on May 18.

The response of the Liberal-National Coalition government, supported completely by Labor, has been to stand by while the British courts rubberstamp his extradition on behalf of US imperialism.

In response to questions from the Australian Associated Press (AAP), Finance Minister Simon Birmingham stated: "The Australian government will not make any representations to the British home secretary."

Instead Birmingham declared: "We trust the independence and integrity of the UK justice system." This is the same "justice system" that has detained Assange in Belmarsh Prison, dubbed Britain's Guantanamo Bay, for two years without charge, while trampling on his legal rights and facilitating the framed-up US extradition request.

Birmingham said the government would continue to provide "consular assistance" to Assange. In practice, this entails Department of Foreign Affairs bureaucrats monitoring the decline of Assange's health and the progress of his persecution, not to halt them, but to limit any political damage to the government. "Consular assistance" is likewise the extent of Labor's "support" for Assange.

The complicit reaction to the court ruling comes amid a

conspiracy of silence in the official campaign for the Australian election, to be held on May 21, just three days after Patel's ruling is brought down. The blackout is being enforced by the government, Labor, the Greens and the press, including those segments that posture as "liberal" and "progressive."

There are two basic reasons for the silence.

First, all the official parties support Australia's deepening involvement in US-led wars and military preparations, including Washington's escalating confrontations with China and Russia aimed at ensuring American imperialist hegemony. They are committed to suppressing anti-war opposition, which Assange personifies.

The corporate media journalists participate, not only because they are employed by billionaires or government broadcasters. They cannot identify with Assange, a journalist being persecuted for telling the truth, because their job is the opposite—to tell lies on behalf of governments and the ruling elite as a whole, on war and every other question.

Second, the political and media establishment is well aware that if Assange's plight were widely known, there would be an outpouring of anger and opposition.

That has been the experience of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners in the first two weeks of the election campaign. When Assange is raised, those who recall him view the WikiLeaks publisher as a courageous and heroic figure who has done the world's population an immense service in the struggle for truth and against war. Workers, and especially young people, many of whom have never had the opportunity of even hearing about Assange, are outraged about being kept in the dark.

The critical question is how these sentiments can be developed and taken forward.

Several prominent Assange supporters have claimed that the ouster of the Coalition government would improve his prospects. Assange's father, John Shipton, said last week that if Labor were elected: "Of course things would change...

This is a great opportunity for us. A fresh parliament has a lot of room to move... I speak to many of them. They don't want this hanging around their neck like an albatross."

The desperation of Assange's relatives for an end to his persecution is entirely understandable. But it must be stated bluntly: the election of a Labor government will change nothing. Suggesting otherwise serves only to direct the growing numbers of working people who support the WikiLeaks founder behind his deadliest enemies.

Asked the same questions by the AAP, Labor's foreign affairs shadow minister Penny Wong gave answers identical in substance to those of Birmingham. All she added was a dose of cynicism, with weasel words of concern. "I do understand why not only Mr Assange's personal supporters but many Australians more generally are worried about this," Wong stated.

But, as the AAP reported: "Penny Wong says it's ultimately a decision for the UK home secretary." Wong was making plain, above all to the Biden administration, that a Labor government would not use its undeniable diplomatic and legal powers to secure Assange's release, as governments have in multiple other instances where citizens are being persecuted abroad.

Labor's perspective for Assange was revealed when Wong declared: "We also expect the government to keep seeking assurances from both the UK and US that he's treated fairly and humanely."

In other words, for Wong and Labor, Assange's dispatch to the American Central Intelligence Agency, which plotted to murder the WikiLeaks founder, is a fait accompli. Labor will ask only that the CIA assassins treat Assange nicely.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese has never once called for Assange's release or criticised his persecution. And Labor, under Albanese's leadership, scuttled a Greens bid for an Australian Senate inquiry into the response of Australian governments to his persecution. Not only is Labor hostile to the fight for Assange's freedom. They are opposed to even discussing his persecution in parliament.

For their part, the Greens, who have occasionally postured as defenders of the WikiLeaks founder, have dropped the issue during the election, as they campaign for a power-sharing arrangement with a minority Labor government.

Such a deal would be modelled on the Labor-Greens government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which in 2010 branded Assange a criminal, tried to illegally cancel his passport and pledged to help the intelligence agencies destroy WikiLeaks. Gillard's lawless actions went hand in hand with her support for the "pivot to Asia," a vast US military build-up in preparation for war with China.

More than a decade on, the preparations for that war are far more advanced. Wong's declaration that Labor would

not free Assange, has more to do with the present situation than the Wikileaks editor's past revelations. The hysterical response of Labor to the security agreement signed by the Solomon Islands government with China is bound up with the preparations for war against China. Labor has also backed the government in financing and arming the Ukrainian government in the escalating war against Russia.

A Labor government, Wong and Albanese have made plain, would work in the closest collaboration with the Biden administration, as it conducts provocations and threats against Beijing. Does anyone really believe, under these circumstances, that Labor would demand that Biden end the persecution of Assange, which the US has spent over ten years and untold millions of dollars pursuing?

The election campaign is characterised by a complete disconnect between the political elite and working people on every issue. There is immense hostility to social inequality, the massive handouts to big business, the "let it rip" COVID policies, skyrocketing inflation and war. These sentiments are beginning to find expression in strikes and other struggles by nurses, aged care workers and other sections of the working class.

This is the constituency for democratic rights, including the fight to free Assange. Supporters of the WikiLeaks founder should challenge the official conspiracy of silence, expose the complicity of the official parties in his persecution and turn to the emerging struggles of the working class in the fight to build a broad, popular movement demanding that an Australian government act to secure his release. The SEP is the only party in the federal election seeking to develop such a movement.

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