Australian PM says “legal action” against Assange should end

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Speaking in the Australian parliament yesterday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese claimed for the first time that his Labor Party government has made representations to the Biden administration to end “legal action” against persecuted WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

Referencing Assange, Albanese repeated past statements that “enough is enough” and that it is “time for this matter to be brought to a conclusion.”

Before yesterday, Albanese not had so much as mentioned Assange in months, despite the fact that the journalist is the world’s most high-profile political prisoner and an Australian citizen. Albanese’s stony silence has persisted amid warnings that Assange’s health has deteriorated to the point that he may die, as a result of more than ten years of US-led persecution.

Assange, moreover, is being detained in a maximum-security prison in Britain. He faces extradition to the US, where he would be prosecuted under the Espionage Act for publishing true information exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. The maximum sentence is 175 years imprisonment, effectively the death penalty by another name.

While this frame-up has proceeded over the past six months, the Labor government has vastly expanded Australia’s military and intelligence ties with the US and Britain, above all in preparation for conflict with China.

Albanese’s comments were a response to questions from independent MP Monique Ryan. She stated:

“Journalists obtaining and publishing sensitive information in the public interest is essential to democracy. Australian citizen Julian Assange is still contained in Belmarsh prison, charged by a foreign government with acts of journalism. Mr Assange's freedom will only come from political intervention. Will the government intervene to bring Mr Assange home?”

The Labor PM was at pains to differentiate himself from this favorable, and accurate, description of the heroic WikiLeaks founder. In the course of a reply that only runs to three paragraphs, Albanese stated twice that he had no “sympathy” for “Mr Assange’s actions.”

Albanese did not elaborate, but the meaning is clear. He is hostile to Assange’s journalism, which exposed thousands of civilian deaths, torture and other war crimes. He opposes WikiLeaks’ public interest reportage, which has been described by Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg and other commentators as among the most important in modern history.

The clear implication is that the US pursuit of Assange was legitimate, at least for a time. In reality, the prime minister was referring to one of the most monstrous frame-ups in recent decades, which included CIA plots to illegally kidnap or assassinate an Australian journalist and publisher in London.

Albanese stated: “I do say though that this issue has gone on for many years now, and when you look at the issue of Mr Assange and compare that with the person responsible for leaking the information, Bradley Manning, now Chelsea Manning, she is now able to participate freely in US society.”

He stated: “The government will continue to act in a diplomatic way, but can I assure the member for Kooyong that I have raised this personally with representatives of the United States government. My position is clear and has been made clear to the US administration that it is time that this matter be brought to a close. This is an Australian citizen.”

Albanese phrased what has been described by some as a call for Assange’s freedom entirely in the negative. Having reiterated his lack of sympathy for the WikiLeaks publisher, he added: “But, having said that, you have to reach a point whereby what is the point of this continuing, this legal action, which could be caught up now for many years into the future?”

Several points need to be made about these comments. The pseudo-legal lynching of a journalist is depicted as little more than an inconvenience, that is dragging on.

But more crucially, Albanese’s statement maintained the ambiguity that has been present in all of the handful of statements made by leading representatives of the

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government. He did not explicitly call for the US to withdraw its extradition proceedings. Nor did he state that Britain must end its participation in the case and free the Australian citizen immediately.

There is every reason to suspect that, to the extent that the Labor government is proposing anything, it is a seedy deal that would leave unchallenged the dire precedent of the US government seeking to prosecute a foreign journalist for exposing its war crimes.

In July, lawyer Kellie Tranter obtained internal documents from the office of Labor Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus on Assange. The two memos said nothing about securing Assange's immediate freedom or blocking the US attempt to prosecute him.

Instead, their sole preoccupation was the prospect of a prison transfer of Assange from the US to Australia. This would presuppose Assange's extradition to America, even though his family and medical experts have warned that the WikiLeaks founder would suicide if that were to occur. It similarly assumed that Assange will be convicted of the espionage charges, or accept a plea deal admitting guilt when he has committed no crime.

This would entrench the assault on press freedom contained in the attempted US prosecution. It would, moreover, take years and years—years that Assange may not have.

Only the naive would place their hopes for Assange's freedom on such sordid machinations.

While their precise content is unknown, the political character and orientation of the Labor government is not. Since assuming office in May, it has drastically accelerated Australia's frontline role in the US-led confrontation with China, functioning as Washington's attack dog in the region.

Almost every day brings a new announcement of greater US-Australian military collaboration and plans for new weapons systems, along with condemnations and threats directed against Beijing. Assange is locked up for exposing imperialist war. The Labor government is greatly intensifying the program of imperialist war.

Albanese, moreover, can say that he has raised the issue of Assange with unnamed representatives of the US administration. But again, his every public utterance has been to insist on the unbreakable character of the US-Australia alliance, which is an instrument of the persecution of Assange and the vehicle through which the Australian ruling elite prosecutes its own predatory interests, especially in the South Pacific.

When the military dictatorship in Myanmar arrested Australian economist Sean Turnell, Albanese immediately demanded his release. If an Australian citizen were being imprisoned by a regime in the crosshairs of US and Australian imperialism, there would talk of sanctions, foreign embassy officials would be reprimanded and diplomatic threats would be issued.

In the case of Assange, no such action has or will be taken.

Albanese's comments were made after prominent publications, including the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, issued a statement calling for his freedom and an end to the US prosecution. As the WSWS noted, it took these outlets, which have ruthlessly attacked Assange a decade to oppose this fundamental attack on democratic rights and press freedom.

Undoubtedly, an aspect is their awareness of widespread popular support for Assange. That was also mentioned by Albanese, who said that the Assange case was "of great interest to many Australians." The PM said that "so many Australians" had "contacted me about this issue."

Those popular sentiments must be developed. But being taken in by Labor's cynical manoeuvring will have the opposite effect. It is a path of paralysis and of bowing before the very political forces responsible for the threat to Assange's life.

In the course of the Assange case, the perspective of making moral appeals to official politicians has been tried and tried again. It has failed and will continue to do so, under conditions of imperialist war and an ever-greater turn to authoritarianism.

The way forward in the fight for Assange's freedom is to turn to the growing movement of the working class against the very governments that are persecuting the WikiLeaks publisher. Among workers and young people, there is a deep commitment to democratic rights. That must be transformed into a political movement fighting for Assange's immediate and unconditional freedom. Only such a struggle will compel an Australian government to fulfil its elementary democratic and legal obligations to the persecuted Australian journalist.

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