

Poll shows 79 percent of Australians want Assange freed

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A poll conducted by the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) last week showed that 79 percent of respondents wanted the Biden administration to end its pursuit of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange so that he can be free.

Eight percent of those who answered were unsure, while just 13 percent indicated their support for the US attempt to extradite Assange from Britain and prosecute him under the draconian Espionage Act. If the Biden administration has its way, Assange faces up to 175 years in prison for exposing US-led war crimes, human rights violations and diplomatic conspiracies.

Media polls are hardly scientific, and sometimes they are wrong. But it is extremely rare for a poll, especially on such a controversial issue, to deliver such an overwhelming result. Given the margin, it seems safe to extrapolate from the poll—one of the few conducted on Assange—that the vast majority of the Australian population are in favor of freeing the WikiLeaks publisher.

That is all the more remarkable because Assange has been subjected to an unending, 12-year stream of calumnies, lies and slanders. Former United Nations Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer has publicly stated that he has never before seen a group of purportedly democratic states, together with the official media, target and vilify an individual with such intensity, over so long a period.

The poll confirms what the WSWS has stressed for years. Despite the falsifications, Assange is widely viewed as an heroic figure by millions of workers and young people, who are appreciative of his role in exposing the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who view the attempted US prosecution as an unjust frame-up.

This has a broader significance. It underscores the fact that the working class, the vast mass of the population, is the constituency for the defence of democratic rights.

Workers are overwhelmingly hostile to war, the dominance of a corporate oligarchy over society and the protracted erosion of democratic rights.

To the extent that the slanders against Assange have found a constituency, it has been in the affluent upper middle class, which is tied to governments and the corporate elite, indifferent to the plight of working people and obsessed with issues of personal identity, especially those relating to gender, race and sexual orientation.

The poll results were reported in an SMH editorial, which was headlined: “The time has come to end the sorry Julian Assange saga.” The editorial nominally called for an end to the persecution of Assange and for his freedom.

Even this, from the SMH, a publication that on “national security” and foreign policy issues toes the line of the most hawkish sections of the intelligence agencies, testifies to the groundswell of support for Assange.

Ironically, though, the same SMH editorial brought forward many of the lies deployed to try to undermine public support for Assange. Such falsifications, each advanced in one line and without substantiation, require a refutation of far greater length. Some of the lies, however, can be refuted, at least in brief:

* The SMH claims that Assange is “Trapped in a limbo of his own making...” What do the august editors mean? That Assange should have known better than to publish exposures of American foreign policy, because of the wrath that would be brought down upon him? That he should, instead, like them, have tried to make a career as a faithful war propagandist?

Or perhaps they are referencing Assange’s entrance into Ecuador’s London embassy? But Assange’s status as a political refugee was repeatedly confirmed by the relevant United Nations bodies. His statements, moreover, that this was necessary to prevent a politically motivated rendition to the US, have been confirmed in spades.

* The SMH states that Assange “fought extradition to Sweden on sexual assault charges—which were dropped in 2019.” This is a defamatory statement. Assange was never charged with a crime in Sweden, as the SMH has been told many times over the years. It is unlikely that the SMH would publish such a clear falsehood against someone who was not being held in a maximum-security prison half a world away.

Assange was subjected to a protracted Swedish “investigation,” characterised by innumerable irregularities, including doctored physical evidence and transparent political interference. It never passed beyond the preliminary phase and was dropped, for a third time, in 2019, for lack of evidence.

* The SMH repeats the old canard that Assange displayed “recklessness” in his 2010 and 2011 publications and placed lives at risk. But in unchallenged testimony, during the British court proceedings, journalists attested that Assange personally redacted the US army’s Iraq and Afghan war logs, and took great pains to protect vulnerable identities.

WikiLeaks carefully curated the release of US global diplomatic cables with media partners, including the SMH. It was *Guardian* journalist David Leigh who published the password to the full tranche of encrypted documents, as a chapter heading in his book. The SMH has never denounced Leigh’s gross irresponsibility.

The editorial forms part of a broader exercise in damage control on the part of the Australian political establishment. After years of media silence, and governments all but pretending Assange did not exist, the issue can no longer be suppressed.

The SMH editorial concludes by referring to the Quadrilateral Dialogue Summit to be held in Sydney next week. Noting Biden’s attendance, along with the Indian and Japanese leaders, it stated: “In our new spirit of friendship, the visit by the US president is surely an opportunity for the governments to show and share some common humanity.”

In a similar vein, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and other members of his government have feigned sympathy for Assange’s plight. Albanese claims to have raised, with the US authorities, that “enough is enough” and it is “time to bring the matter to a close.”

What this concretely means is still entirely unclear. The government claims to have stated its position to its British and US counterparts, and, with a shrug of the shoulders, asserts that little more can be done. This stands in sharp contrast to the aggressive legal and diplomatic

interventions that have been used to secure the freedom of other persecuted Australian citizens.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation last week, Albanese repeated this general line, but he added: “a solution needs to be found... and Mr Assange needs to be a part of that of course.”

That comment clearly implies that the “solution” Labor is seeking is some sort of plea deal. Otherwise, Assange’s part would simply be to walk out of prison a free man.

This has a broader significance. If Albanese’s comments are true, and he has suggested that the US end its prosecution, the turn toward advocating a plea deal indicates that these approaches were rebuked. The “quiet diplomacy” touted by the Labor government, if it occurred at all, has failed.

One can envision a scenario in which acute pressure is placed on Assange to admit some culpability, or accede to a plea deal, under conditions where he faces the rest of his life behind bars.

But Albanese’s line cuts two ways. If Assange were to reject such an arrangement, the Labor government would no doubt claim that the WikiLeaks founder himself was responsible for his continued incarceration and prospective extradition.

Many other questions emerge. A plea deal would only be possible, it seems, after extradition. That is, Assange would have to be dispatched to his US persecutors prior to any formal agreement. But his family and doctors have warned that he could die a suicide if faced with that prospect.

The sordid manoeuvres of the Australian political establishment and the government are aimed, not at freeing Assange and defending democratic rights, but at neutering a struggle by workers and young people in that direction.

The Labor government is preparing to roll out the red carpet for Biden, Assange’s persecutor in chief. The US president and the right-wing, militarist leaders of Japan and India are visiting Australia to discuss their advanced preparations for an aggressive war against China, a program that is incompatible with democratic rights.



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