

Stella Assange at Sydney rally: “It’s not just Julian who has lost his freedom, but all of us”

Oscar Grenfell
24 May 2023

Some 800 people attended a protest in Sydney yesterday morning demanding the immediate freedom of imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. People came from across New South Wales and from around the country to attend the rally, which was one of the largest demanding Assange’s freedom yet, despite being held on a weekday.

Speaking at the demonstration, Stella Assange, Julian’s wife, declared that the protesters were “at the forefront of a global movement for justice. A global movement that converges on one man, but the meaning of which goes far beyond Julian’s freedom. It’s not just Julian who has lost his freedom, but all of us. Because in order to keep Julian in prison, they have had to corrupt their own rules and their own principles.”

Stella, visiting Australia for the first time, noted that her tour had initially been planned to coincide with a scheduled visit of US President Joe Biden. He had been set down to attend a summit of the warmongering and anti-China Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue this week in Sydney.

Biden cancelled, however Stella proceeded with the visit. She explained the crucial importance of the fight within Australia to securing her husband’s freedom. Assange is detained in Britain and faces extradition to the US, where he would be tried on Espionage Act charges carrying 175 years imprisonment for exposing American war crimes.

Assange is an Australian citizen. Stella explained: “Julian’s case is a case of global importance. But you guys are at the centre of it because Julian is an Australian, he’s a country boy, and he’s from this country. That means that the key to securing Julian’s release lies with you.”

Assange’s supporters in Australia were part of a “global movement” involving millions of people all over the world, she said. There is a growing recognition, internationally, that “he’s in prison because he exposed the crimes of others. No decent human being will ever tolerate that. The only people whose interest remains Julian’s imprisonment, are the ones who are guilty and implicated in those crimes.”

Within Australia, there had been a “sea change.” Only a few years ago, there had been “radio silence” on Assange’s case. But increasingly it was being discussed in the media, as well as by official politicians. This, Stella stressed, was a consequence of the demands made by ordinary people and a protracted

grassroots campaign.

This fight had to be deepened, she said. “You guys need to shout louder, fight harder, put the pressure on each of your representatives, make Julian’s situation visible everywhere, every day, on your cars, on your shirts. Every day you tell all your friends, you talk about it with your family... Make sure Julian remains top priority until he steps out of that prison. I think we’re near, we can achieve this together.”

Stella noted that it was her first time in Australia, but it would not be her last. “I will come back here, home with Julian, and our kids who are Australian citizens will come home too.”

John Shipton, Assange’s father, placed the persecution of Assange within a broader context. Brown University, in the United States, had recently published a report showing that there had been 4.5 million deaths in the Middle East following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. An earlier document, from the same institution, estimated that the predatory US-led wars in the region had displaced 38 million people.

Speaking of those US interventions Shipton condemned a “hegemon standing in a river of blood.” He emphasised the striving of ordinary people for “justice” and “humanity,” which would ultimately be victorious. Assange’s case and the fight for his freedom were integral to this broader struggle.

Gabriel Shipton, Assange’s brother, said: “If anything is to be taken from Julian’s persecution, it is that it has mobilised people all around the world... The fight gives meaning to Julian’s work. It has brought us all together here to fight for something that is so important to our Western democracies and that’s a free press. How can we make decisions about what our governments do in our name if we don’t know? It’s not possible.”

David McBride addressed the protest. A former Australian army lawyer, he faces life behind bars for blowing the whistle on Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. They included verified murders of civilians and prisoners and other violations of international law. For these offenses, McBride, the man who exposed them, is the first to face court proceedings.

“There’s a good chance that even though I reported murders and cover-ups, that I’m going to go to jail for the rest of my life... It’s not something I hang my head about. It’s something I’m proud of... We need to stand up, the future of the planet

depends on it.”

The whistleblower noted the comments of Australian Labor Party Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who has made extremely tepid statements expressing “concern” over Assange’s plight. Albanese has said that “enough is enough” in relation to the Assange case. He claims to have made private representations to the US and British governments on behalf of Assange, but has stopped far short of any public demand for the Australian journalist’s freedom.

McBride responded: “I say this to Anthony Albanese. Enough of you saying ‘enough is enough.’ It means nothing. Imagine if I had witnessed war crimes in Afghanistan, witnessed murder and cover-up... and all I said to them is ‘enough is enough.’ It’s not enough.” McBride called for Albanese to “step up to the plate” and secure Assange’s unconditional freedom.

Stephen Kenny, Assange’s Australian lawyer, issued the same demand. Kenny represented Australian citizen David Hicks, who was rendered to the American military prison in Guantánamo Bay as part of the “war on terror.” Hicks was eventually freed and returned to Australia, as the result of a powerful campaign led by his father Terry Hicks. David Hicks had been compelled to sign a plea deal, despite having committed no crime.

Kenny noted the parallels. “Like David Hicks, Julian Assange has not committed any crime at all. So why is he in jail?” The editors of other major publications, who were involved in WikiLeaks’ 2010 and 2011 releases, for which Assange is being prosecuted, remain at liberty. This, Kenny explained, made clear that the case against Assange was political and required a political solution.

He outlined some of the abuses of the British judiciary. This included placing Assange in a glass box at the back of his courtroom during the first extradition proceedings, denying him the right to participate in his own case. Assange’s lawyers, moreover, had filed their latest appeal in November. The British judges merely need to determine whether he has an arguable case, a process which Kenny said should take several days or at most a week. But six months on and this task has not been completed.

Albanese has recently hinted at the prospect of a plea deal in the Assange case. Kenny forcefully rejected this course. “Is there a Hicks solution? Why should there be? He has not committed any crime. He should not be forced to plead to anything. We need our prime minister to stand up, not just say ‘enough is enough.’”

The rally raised several political issues. Many of the speakers, importantly, emphasised the decisive role of mobilising ordinary people in the fight to free Assange.

Inevitably, the statements of Albanese and other Labor representatives have generated some hope within the Assange camp. But there is no indication, whatsoever, that Albanese is fighting for Assange’s freedom, behind closed doors or

anywhere else. This week he refused to even meet with Stella Assange. Albanese was part of the Gillard Labor government, which in 2010 and 2011, played a central role in the initial stages of the persecution of Assange.

Some speakers referenced the “special relationship” between Australia and the US. This could be leveraged to aid Assange’s freedom, they suggested.

In fact the US-Australia alliance is an imperialist mechanism, serving the very same war drive exposed by Assange himself. More than a decade on and the militarist program is far advanced, with the US now waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and preparing for conflict against China. Labor has placed Australia on the frontlines of these plans for a catastrophic war.

This program is incompatible with basic democratic rights. As in the 20th century, war means a turn to dictatorial forms of rule.

Speakers implied that if Assange were not freed, it would show that Australia was in a vassal-like relationship with the US. This is also false. Australia is an imperialist power in its own right, which has oppressed and exploited the colonial masses, especially in the South Pacific, for over a century. The Australian ruling elite is supporting the US aggression against China as part of the pursuit of its own predatory interests, which are secured under the umbrella of the American alliance.

The war on whistleblowers and publishers is not merely a US phenomenon. As the McBride case demonstrates, Labor is also carrying out a crackdown in line with its militarist program.

Finally, a word should be said about the MC, former Greens politician Scott Ludlam. Ludlam personifies the bankruptcy of any orientation to parliament to fight war and defend democratic rights. He is a political charlatan, who has traded on fake-left rhetoric for years.

But when he was in office, Ludlam, and the Greens effectively went along with the persecution of Assange. They became de facto partners in a coalition with the minority Gillard Labor government, even as it collaborated in the campaign of the US intelligence agencies to destroy Assange and WikiLeaks.

When challenged on this by the Socialist Equality Party in 2012, Ludlam indicated that he was not prepared to “crash the government,” even if it did nothing to “get Julian out of trouble.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact