

Demonstrators outside UK High Court demand Assange's freedom

Robert Stevens
20 February 2024

Several thousand people protested outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London Tuesday to demand the release of Julian Assange, as a two-day hearing opened. Assange's lawyers are at the UK's High Court to seek leave to appeal his extradition to the United States on trumped up charges under the Espionage Act.

Assange is so ill that he was unable to attend the hearing in person, or even to watch on a video link from the maximum security Belmarsh prison where he has been incarcerated for the last five years.

Speaking from a stage before entering the court, Stella Assange, Julian's wife, described his brutal treatment by the British state. She told Sky News, "Julian's life is at risk. Every day he's in prison his life is at risk. But if he's taken to the United States he will never be a free man again. He will not survive it. The United States wants to put him in the deepest darkest hole of the US prison system for publishing the truth.

"It's very difficult to explain to the children that this is an important moment. I saw Julian on Saturday and I realised afterwards that I don't know if I will see him again. He's been in Belmarsh prison for almost five years. He didn't do anything wrong. He shouldn't have spent a single day in prison."

The contempt of the British ruling class and its institutions for basic democratic rights was on display at the High Court. Giving an update on proceedings at lunchtime, Kristinn Hrafnsson, the editor-in-chief of Wikileaks, described the situation facing Julian's family and reporters.

"I have to tell you I was not able to observe what is going on inside. When I got inside this morning I was not allowed in the main chamber. I was sent to an annex room with most of the reporters who were sitting there not hearing a thing because the audio was constantly breaking. They were sitting there, they were

leaving the room, they were protesting.

"If this is how you practise open justice, I don't have high faith in the court system here. It is absurd that the journalists are not able to observe what is going on in the most important case for journalists in modern times...

"I was told inside the courtroom that the court decided to put this case in one of the smallest court rooms they have in the building, so only a handful of individuals could observe.

"How is that possible with the massive interest in the case? What are they trying to hide? Why are they toning down the access to these important proceedings. This is not the first time we have observed this. This has been going on in every proceeding we have had in the Julian Assange case."

Jeremy Corbyn also addressed the crowd. He kept his mouth shut about Assange for five years from 2015-19 during his time as Labour leader, refusing to mobilise his millions of supporters in the WikiLeaks founder's defence.

He has since attempted to portray himself as Assange's defender. But his entire perspective is to make polite appeals to Assange's persecutors to undergo a change of heart.

Speaking before the hearing started, Corbyn told protesters, "This court today has an opportunity: that Julian's case is heard, that Julian's search for justice is achieved and that ultimately Julian is able to walk free.

"But it also depends on the political process and atmosphere in the United States. President Biden could end this incarceration in two minutes. He could withdraw the whole case against Julian Assange if he believes in press freedom as he says he does. If he believes in a pluralist democracy, as he says he does, then let Julian go and let Julian tell the world the truth

of the horrors of inequality that exist on this planet.”

Corbyn concluded with a final appeal to the goodwill of the judges hearing the case: “I say to the court, very gently and very persuasively, whatever your decision we aren’t going away”.

Protesters arrived several hours before the court opened, covering the main gate in ribbons with messages backing Assange on them. Many chanted “Free, free, free Assange!” Drivers on the busy road adjacent to the court beeped their horns in support, with bus passengers also expressing solidarity and giving thumbs up signs.

A large banner placed in front of the High Court read, “Julian Assange is a hero”. Many brought home-made placards, including one linking Assange’s years-long incarceration with the wars waged by the imperialist powers. One read, “Assange to Palestine-One Struggle, One Fight”.

At the conclusion of Tuesday’s hearing, it was announced that a march from the High Court to the prime minister’s Downing Street residence would be held on Wednesday afternoon.



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