

Assange supporters march to Downing Street as two-day hearing ends in London

Our reporters**21 February 2024**

Thousands of protesters marched to Downing Street from the Royal Courts of Justice on Wednesday in support of imprisoned WikiLeaks journalist and publisher Julian Assange.

The march through central London to the official residence of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak came at the end of a two-day hearing that saw Assange's lawyers seek leave from the High Court to appeal his extradition to the United States. The High Court judges have reserved their decision.

Assange faces 17 trumped-up charges under the Espionage Act, carrying a prison term of 175 years, in retribution for his courageous journalism exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and human rights abuses throughout the world.

Behind a lead banner held by Assange's wife Stella, father John Shipton, brother Gabriel, and WikiLeaks colleagues and supporters including editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, marchers arrived at Downing Street shortly before 5.30pm.

Earlier that day, Assange's family, colleagues, and supporters addressed protesters during the proceedings' lunchtime recess, speaking from a platform erected opposite the court.

Gabriel Shipton, Assange's brother, said the arguments that morning by US prosecutors amounted to a declaration that "day was night, and night was day. That Chelsea Manning was not a whistleblower, and Julian is not a journalist."

Their case had effectively asserted that "journalism is a threat to democracy, and whistleblowing is a threat to democracy, and our right to know is a threat to democracy. Shame on them, free Julian Assange!"

Australian independent MP Andrew Wilkie addressed the rally. He sponsored a cross-party motion passed by the Australian parliament last week calling for Assange

to be brought home.

Citing the Collateral Murder video exposing the gunning down of Iraqi civilians and Reuters journalists by a US Apache helicopter, Wilkie said, "The man who told the truth, who provided hard evidence of US war crimes, he's the one in front of a court." Wilkie's conclusion, shielding the US government, was that "It should've been the pilots of that helicopter" who were charged.

He concluded, "Regardless of what you think of Julian, this matter must be brought to an end, the extradition must be dropped, the charges must be dropped. He must be busted out of Belmarsh, he must be allowed to be reunited with his family. Because Julian Assange is the hero here, not the villain."

Hrafnsson said the Department of Justice's lawyers had added "absolutely nothing new" to their threadbare legal arguments of the past decade, comparing their presentation in court to "a lunch of leftover smorgasbord from last month".

The US government allegations against Assange had "all been refuted, not just in the court rooms but with new evidence that was totally disregarded." He urged supporters to seize on what he described as a "glimmer of hope" at the hearing, suggesting the High Court's judges were being forced under public pressure to consider the arguments made by Assange's lawyers.

Craig Murray, ex-British diplomat and human rights activist who has reported extensively on Assange's case, was more explicit in promoting hope in the High Court. He told protesters at Downing Street that for the first time in five years, "I saw judges who were actually listening intelligently and paying attention to what the defence says. And we have done that. We have done that because they can no longer ignore us. They can no longer scorn us."

Murray's remarks epitomise the complacent class orientation of the official campaign to free Assange, based on appeals to and confidence in so-called "enlightened" sections of the state. Such a perspective may appeal to ageing Corbynites and Stalinists, but it is incapable of rousing mass popular indignation and opposition in the working class and among young people against war, austerity and the evisceration of democratic rights.

The British state has demonstrated ruthless determination to crush Assange's democratic and legal rights. The highest levels of the judiciary have rubber-stamped measures aimed at destroying Assange physically and mentally, holding him captive while preparing to deliver him to the clutches of state agencies, including the CIA, that have been exposed as plotting to assassinate him.

Throughout the two days of hearings at the Royal Courts of Justice, the protest for Assange elicited heartfelt support from passing London bus drivers, couriers, lorry drivers and other city workers. The potential exists now for a mass movement in the working class to win Assange's freedom, a fact underscored by deepening global opposition to the genocide in Gaza.

As Stella Assange told the rally opposite the court, "How pathetic the UK case is. They have to rely on lies. Fourteen years on, and all they can do is repeat the lies from the very first Pentagon press conference talking points sheet.

"What they are trying to argue is that state secrets trump revealing state crimes... In that court room, they are having to make their position increasingly clear. They have to admit that what they are doing is criminalising journalism, criminalising the truth.

"They are liars, they are criminals, and they are persecuting a journalist who exposed them. Julian is a truth teller, he's a political prisoner, and the world is watching these courts and how they deal with this case."



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