

Australian educators demand freedom of Julian Assange

Committee for Public Education
26 February 2024

Last Thursday, a group of teachers from the northern and western working-class suburbs of Melbourne overwhelmingly passed a resolution demanding the immediate and unconditional freedom of imprisoned journalist Julian Assange.

The resolution was adopted at a Maribyrnong regional meeting of the Australian Education Union (AEU), held the day after Assange's two-day hearing in the UK High Court. The WikiLeaks editor is seeking leave to appeal an order for extradition to the US.

Assange faces extradition to the United States to stand trial under the Espionage Act for exposing war crimes, including those by US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. If found guilty of the 17 trumped-up charges, he faces up to 175 years imprisonment in the US.

The resolution defending the journalist was moved and seconded by members and supporters of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE).

In speaking to the motion, Sue Phillips, primary school teacher and national convenor of the CFPE, drew attention to the life and death situation that Assange faces after being hounded by capitalist governments for more than 14 years. This includes spending the last five years locked up in the hellish conditions of Belmarsh prison. So dire is his health that he could not even attend the recent London High Court hearing, either in person or remotely.

Phillips explained: "Assange's courageous exposures such as the release of the 'Collateral Murder' video needs to be reviewed in the context of the genocide and war crimes that are being carried out every single day in Gaza where more than 30,000 civilians have been murdered. More than a decade ago, Assange revealed to the world's population, he lifted the curtain, on the murderous scenes being carried out by the US and other capitalist governments in the Middle East and elsewhere."

She stated, "There is a direct relationship between the desperate attempt to silence and criminalise Assange and

the targeting and killing of more than 100 journalists and their families in Gaza. Today, unlike more than a decade ago, we can see via social media the atrocities and horrors of war being carried out in real time."

Phillips explained that both Labor and Liberal governments in Australia have been complicit in the continuous tortuous and cruel criminalisation of Assange as far back as the Gillard Labor government.

She said, "The recent motion in the federal parliament, supposedly in support of Assange, by the cross-party group of parliamentarians, including Labor, Greens and others did not call for the dropping of the trumped-up charges against Assange, but pushed the line that 'enough was enough' and 'the matter should be brought to a close.'"

Pointing to the ongoing support of rank-and-file educators to the defence of Assange, with CFPE resolutions passed at branches over several years, including a resolution passed at the AEU state conference last year, the union executive, she said, had "remained silent."

The resolution moved by Phillips read: "This AEU Maribyrnong regional meeting demands the end to the courageous journalist and publisher Julian Assange's extradition proceedings to the US and his immediate and unconditional freedom.

"In a UK High Court hearing on February 21 and 22, Assange sought leave to appeal an order for his extradition. If this is denied, he will have exhausted all legal avenues in the British courts and can be rendered to the US, facing 17 trumped-up charges carrying a prison term of 175 years. This is retribution for exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and human rights abuses across the world.

"We fully endorse the principled stand of educators in the Maribyrnong region, other regions and branches that have consistently passed resolutions over several years

calling for Assange's defence under successive governments from the Gillard Labor government, Coalition governments of Abbott, Turnbull, Morrison to the present Albanese Labor government who all have been complicit in Assange's continued criminalisation.

"We oppose the AEU executive, that has remained silent on the cruel and inhumane incarceration of Assange despite ongoing support by rank-and-file educators, including a resolution overwhelmingly passed at the 2023 state conference attended by more than 150 AEU delegates.

"This meeting calls on teachers, union branches, and workplaces to pass resolutions of support for Julian Assange.

"We demand that the AEU executive immediately publish in its journal and through its online bulletins, membership resolutions passed in defence of Assange, including the AEU 2023 conference resolution."

Justin Mullaly, deputy president of the state branch of the AEU, was in attendance at Maribyrrnong meeting last week, and spoke in the debate. He claimed that he was "80 percent in agreement with the resolution and was in full support of Assange, but did not agree that the AEU had remained silent and that they had publicised their support for Assange."

Mullaly's claim was immediately questioned by Mandy Jones, a supporter of the CFPE and the seconder of the Assange resolution. She said, "Where are the publications? I have never seen any bulletins, statements in defence of Assange from the union executive. Even after the state conference last year where a resolution was passed on Assange and a few days later a report on the conference was sent to members, there was no mention of Assange—what seemed to instead dominate was the AEU executive's promotion of the Aboriginal 'Voice' to parliament and other issues."

In the course of the debate at the Maribyrrnong meeting, an amendment was proposed by a teacher and AEU state councillors to delete the sentence: "We oppose the AEU executive, that has remained silent on the cruel and inhumane incarceration of Assange despite ongoing support by rank-and-file educators, including a resolution overwhelmingly passed at the 2023 state conference attended by more than 150 AEU delegates."

Phillips spoke against the amendment, reminding teachers that the resolutions on Assange came from the rank-and-file at the AEU conference. Mullaly, she continued, had spoken at the conference to delete a passage pointing to the complicity of the Albanese

government in the continued imprisonment of Assange.

The amendment was passed. In summing up Phillips called on teachers to support the resolution, adding that Assange had previously called for workplaces to take action in his defence. She stressed that his freedom was bound up with the development of a global anti-war movement.

The amended resolution was then overwhelmingly passed.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Jones stated: "All educators and workers must fight for Assange's freedom. The treatment of Assange has raised serious alarm bells and is a warning to us all. His exposure of war crimes in Iraq has been heroic. The war criminals have not, however, been brought to justice.

"The AEU and other unions have largely remained silent. They claim to champion human rights and press freedom, but their actions—or lack thereof—tell a different story. I have seen no evidence of the AEU's claim that they have fought for his case among educators.

"The international community, including unions and educational institutions, must step up the fight for his freedom. Assange's fate hangs in the balance, and history will remember whether we stood up for justice or remained complicit in his suffering."

The CFPE calls on all educators, young people and workers to call meetings to discuss the urgent and immediate threat to Assange's life and the dangers it poses to the democratic rights of all. Pass resolutions demanding the blocking of his extradition to the US and his unconditional freedom.

Education workers who wish to make contact with the CFPE:

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