

Julian Assange and the fight against imperialist war

Thomas Scripps, Chris Marsden

25 March 2024

At 10.30 am on Tuesday March 26, the UK's High Court will hand down its judgement on whether Julian Assange can appeal his extradition to the United States.

The World Socialist Web Site is publishing the text of the speech delivered by Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden and Assistant National Secretary Tom Scripps at public meetings held in Manchester, London, Inverness and Sheffield in the last week under the title "The Fight to Free Julian Assange is the Fight Against War."

Let's begin with who we're speaking about today. Julian Assange is one of, if not the most significant journalist of the 21st century.

Many of you will know. But others, thanks to his relentless persecution over more than a decade, will not fully understand why this is so.

Assange's extraordinary record of investigative journalism

Assange founded the organisation WikiLeaks in 2006, inspired by Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, exposing the reality of the Vietnam War. Through WikiLeaks, Assange conducted the release of some of the most explosive revelations of imperialist war crimes and human rights abuses in history.

In one year, between April 2010 and April 2011, the organisation published:

- The infamous "Collateral Murder" video providing prima facie evidence of a US war crime in Iraq, in which an Apache helicopter crew massacred 18 civilians, including journalists and first responders.
- The Afghanistan and Iraq War Logs, detailing the systematic war crimes carried out in the course of the imperialist invasions and occupations of each country, including the murder of tens of thousands of civilians, the denial and cover-up of those murders, and the widespread use of torture.
- US State Department Diplomatic Cables, showing Washington's involvement in military coups and support for the human rights abuses of dictatorships all around the globe; shedding more light on its programmes of drone assassinations, surveillance, and the sabotage of climate negotiations.
- The Guantánamo Files, providing evidence of the United States' illegal practices of rendition and torture, carried out with impunity against innocent people from all over the world.

This was material leaked by the heroic whistleblower Chelsea Manning, who paid seven years of her life for it in prison between 2010 and 2017, including in solitary confinement and which drove her to two suicide attempts. Manning then spent another year in prison in 2019, again largely in solitary confinement and leading to another suicide attempt, and was fined a quarter of a million dollars, for refusing to testify against Assange.

It should also be noted that Assange and WikiLeaks helped

whistleblower Edward Snowden flee the United States in 2013, by laying down a false escape route. Snowden exposed, among other things, massive state surveillance programmes that record all phone calls made in the US and, in alliance with the UK, directly access the communications, emails, Facebook messages and Internet history of tens of millions of people in Britain and America.

The impact of the WikiLeaks exposures cannot be overstated. They contributed to an upsurge of anti-war, anti-imperialist sentiment around the world, a discrediting of the United States government and its allies responsible for these crimes, and of the corporate media who helped to cover them up.

For many young people at the time, they were formative events in their political development. And their influence played a significant role in the dramatic shift to the left among younger generations in the last decade and a half that we now see in a heightened form in the global protest movement over Gaza.

In North Africa, whose governments' dictatorial conspiracies with Washington against their populations were exposed by WikiLeaks, the revelations helped trigger a swell of popular protest which has now passed into history as the Arab Spring. Events in Tunisia in January 2011, which toppled the Ben Ali regime, were referred to nervously in the corporate media at the time as "the first WikiLeaks revolution."

The popular support for Assange was enormous. He was *Time* magazine's readers' choice Person of the Year and *Le Monde*'s readers' choice Person of the Year in 2010.

Assange was also awarded a Sydney Peace Foundation Gold Medal, a Walkley Award (the highest honour in Australian journalism) and the UK's Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism in 2011.

The persecution of Assange

Fast forward to today. Assange is a month away from completing his fifth year incarcerated in Britain's highest security institution, His Majesty's Prison Belmarsh, in London. He has been locked in his cell for 23 hours a day, routinely denied medical care, and arbitrarily prevented from seeing visitors, including his wife and two children. He has suffered suicidal thoughts, a mini-stroke and aged well beyond his 52 years.

He is facing, and fighting in court, extradition to the United States to face charges under the Espionage Act which carry a de facto life sentence and could be reformulated to incur the death penalty. In September 2021, evidence emerged of CIA plots to kidnap or assassinate him.

A life sentence would be little mercy. He would be kept in the deepest hole the US prison system can dig, in facilities designed for convicted terrorists where American imperialism has refined the practice of psychologically destroying human beings. The conditions are so horrific

that medical experts have testified in court that Assange would likely commit suicide rather than endure them.

In February, the former CIA engineer Joshua Schulte, who leaked documents to WikiLeaks on how the CIA cracked smartphones, was handed a 40-year sentence. A similar sentence for Assange would mean life behind bars.

Any “trial” will be held under impossible conditions, with every conceivable restriction placed on his ability to prepare his defence and a jury selected from among a population in Langley, Virginia mostly made up of workers in the US security services, in a district which has never failed to find a defendant charged with national security breaches guilty.

The UK’s High Court is now deciding whether to grant him his *final* opportunity to appeal to the British courts against extradition. If they refuse, he could be on a plane to the United States within hours.

From hero to pariah: the character assassination of Assange

The story of how this transformation took place—from one of the most widely known and supported individuals on the planet to a man persecuted to death behind closed doors—is a vital one for the anti-war, socialist left.

What was done to Assange will be attempted, in various forms, against every major figure who takes a stand against world imperialism. Drawing the lessons from this grotesque attack is essential, not only in securing freedom for Julian Assange, but in beating back against the imperialist criminals supporting genocide in Gaza and driving the entire world into war, and finally defeating them.

Assange faced a campaign of disinformation, smears and political isolation and betrayal, waged on a global scale.

This naturally took its most direct and naked form in the bowels of Washington and the Pentagon, where calls for him to be treated as an enemy of the state and to be silenced made clear the intentions of American imperialism and of all its imperialist allies.

But from the outset, a key role in Assange’s persecution was played by those who he would have considered to be in the camp of his defenders, but who turned on him like a pack of dogs.

Firstly, the “liberal” newspapers which had worked with Assange to publish the leaked information—the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *El País*—who made clear that their intention had always been to control the flow damaging information and then set him up for attack.

Every one of them publicly disowned Assange and cast him out of the noble fraternity of client journalism. The pretext for doing so was the unredacted release of hundreds of thousands of US diplomatic cables. But this was only made possible by the *Guardian* journalist David Leigh publishing the password needed to access them in his hatchet-job book on WikiLeaks.

Nevertheless, from that point on in the pages of these newspapers, Assange was “not a journalist” but a “reckless”, “irresponsible” “hacker”, described in terms so venal that they have been cited repeatedly by the US prosecution to prove Assange is not worthy of journalistic protections.

The Swedish sexual assault frame-up

A vicious blow was dealt by a state-manufactured sexual assault scandal, in which the Swedish government concocted an investigation into Assange which could serve as a pretext for his arrest.

When this investigation was announced in 2010, while Assange was in the UK, he and those around him explained their fear that extradition to Sweden was an attempt to blacken his name and a smokescreen for eventual extradition to the United States.

In 2012, he entered and received political asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. It was immediately placed under round-the-clock surveillance by the Metropolitan Police—and very soon, we now know, by the CIA—which kept Assange under de facto house arrest for the best part of seven years.

On the nature of the Swedish prosecutor’s allegations and conduct of the case, a detailed and devastating analysis is available from the United Nation’s former special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer, who would later testify to Assange’s psychological torture by his imprisonment and the slander campaign against him.

It is publicly available; among the irregularities he cites are “disregard for confidentiality”, “disregard for exculpatory evidence”, “proactive manipulation of evidence”, “disregard for conflict of interest”, and “disregard for the requirements of necessity and proportionality”.

This was all a fairly transparent frame-up, utilising two entirely consensual sexual encounters, that anyone in journalistic circles would naturally assume was an attempt to seek an alternative route to extradite Assange.

No charges were ever brought and the Swedish authorities refused to question Assange in the UK, despite having done so in other cases, because they wanted him in their clutches. The Swedish government refused to provide a guarantee he would not be extradited onward to the United States. And the entire investigation was dropped once Assange was in UK hands and the US extradition request was in place.

In 2017, it was revealed by the excellent journalism of Stefania Maurizi that, in 2011, the UK Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), then under the direction of one Sir Keir Starmer, had destroyed correspondence with Swedish prosecutors relating to Assange. One line which did survive was from a British CPS lawyer advising Swedish investigators not to question Assange in the UK.

In 2018, Maurizi revealed that Sweden had, in 2013, considered dropping the case but was told by the UK, “Don’t you dare get cold feet” and that “cost was no issue” in this case, clearly pointing to the conspiracy underway at the highest levels of government.

None of this stopped the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* publishing a torrent of filthy anti-Assange attack articles which amount not so much to a character assassination as a firebombing. Constant references were made to Assange’s being “charged”, which was never the case and to his being a rapist, weirdo, freak, or any other insult which came to mind. And to anyone questioning this narrative, or even insisting on the presumption of innocence, the threat of failing to “believe women” was employed to demand silence.

The role of the pseudo-left

Politically the most significant aspect of all of this was the backing it received from tendencies in the UK like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP).

In 2012, the SWP wrote that “Julian Assange must face rape charges” (there were no charges) and alleged that his supporters had “refused to take the rape allegations seriously”. The Socialist Party made the same accusation: “It is important for socialists to reject any idea that some rape does not need to be taken seriously.”

What this amounted to was an insistence that Assange relinquish any legal and political protections he had against the US government, which

made no secret of its pursuit of him and WikiLeaks, and put himself totally at the service of the Swedish state acting as a front for US imperialism.

The SWP and the SP, and pseudo-left tendencies all over the world, were in fact jettisoning any socialist or anti-imperialist pretensions in order to maintain their links with sections of the affluent middle class, angry with Assange for upsetting the cozy status quo of world politics and very happy to exercise their hostility under the slogan of “believing women”.

Even as late as April 2019, when these allegations were thoroughly discredited, the SWP still insisted, “it can’t be ignored that he has faced allegations of sexual assault and rape in Sweden... Assange first entered the Ecuadorian embassy to avoid extradition to Sweden on these charges... [not true: it was to avoid onward extradition to the United States] Assange should face trial [remember, even at this stage there are still no charges] in Sweden”.

The Democratic Party and Russian agent allegation

It should also be noted that, in 2016, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* vociferously alleged that Assange was a Trump-supporting Russian stooge. The trigger for this was WikiLeaks’ release of Democratic Party internal emails revealing the sordid financial dealings of one of the twin parties of American capitalism, especially of its presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Assange’s real attitude to Clinton and Trump is made clear in his describing an election contest between the two as a choice between “cholera or gonorrhoea,” a description with which I think everyone in this room would heartily agree.

Clinton is such a vicious thug that her nickname is “Killary”. She is famous for her filmed CBS news statement on the assassination of Colonel Gaddafi, “We came, We saw, He died,” made as she laughed like a hyena. Asked about Assange when the WikiLeaks releases first came out she reportedly replied, “Can’t we just drone this guy?”

But for the liberal and pseudo-left tendencies that circle the Democratic Party like flies and portray the party of the Pentagon and Wall Street as the party of progress, criticising Clinton was an unpardonable crime for which many have never forgiven Assange.

To prove Assange’s supposed connection with the Russian state, the *Guardian*’s Luke Harding went as far as publishing outright lies, which were proved to be lies, and never retracted by him or the paper.

All of this was designed to isolate Assange from the popular support he had won, by rallying the nominally “liberal” and “left” middle class, already nervous about the implications of his exposure of the imperialist governments, to the witch-hunt. And while Assange was systematically denigrated, he was kept locked away, out of the sight and mind of the working class and young people, many of whom will now not remember a time when he was free and able to speak publicly.

A political conspiracy of silence

No one wants to talk about this most uncomfortable fact today. But Assange’s isolation was consolidated by those who now claim to be his defenders.

This naturally includes pseudo-left groups such as Counterfire. John Rees of that tendency was chosen to head the official campaign opposing

Assange’s extradition. But from 2012 until April 2019, Rees’s Counterfire wrote nothing on Assange, after a large section of its membership demanded he be sent to Sweden.

However, the most consequential silence for Assange was that exercised by Jeremy Corbyn.

If there was one person in the UK and internationally in a position to change Assange’s situation, it was the former Labour Party leader. Here was someone who had expressed support for Assange in the past, who had a truly mass following, and who was given the platform of two general elections on which to make a case for his freedom.

Instead, Corbyn responded to his election as Labour leader by drawing a veil of silence over Assange. Between July 2015, two months before his election as leader, and April 2019, Corbyn made no public comment on the WikiLeaks founder’s situation.

In that month, when Assange’s seizure from the Ecuadorian Embassy by British police on April 11 became a world news story, Corbyn was finally forced to comment. But it was the political equivalent of pulling teeth.

When Prime Minister Theresa May announced Assange’s arrest to cheers from Tory and Labour MPs, Corbyn was silent. Later, when Sajid Javid made a formal statement on the arrest and charges, he exited the chamber, leaving Diane Abbott to speak on his party’s behalf. She stated, “It is whistleblowing into illegal wars, mass murder, murder of civilians and corruption on a grand scale that has put Julian Assange in the crosshairs of the US administration.”

All true. But then the caveats and reversals began. She made clear in the same statement Labour’s hand-washing view that the matter of extradition to the US was “now in the hands of the British law courts”, in which she had “the utmost confidence”. She then tweeted, “Assange skipping bail in UK, or any rape charge that may be brought by Swedish authorities shouldn’t be ignored.”

Corbyn, finally pressed on Assange by ITV News, repeated Abbott’s “matter for the courts line” before giving a free pass to the campaign among the Blairites over the totally discredited Sweden case, saying, “obviously he must answer those questions and those demands about the accusations made against him by people in Sweden. There can be no hiding place from those kind of accusations.”

He then ignored Assange’s situation for another 10 months, including the whole of the 2019 general election, despite being put on the spot over the issue at least three times that we’re aware of.

- In June 2019, a team from the Julian Assange Defence Committee lobbied his Constituency Labour Party meeting in Islington North, to no effect.

- In September 2019, former Labour MP Chris Williamson moved an early day motion opposing Assange’s extradition, which Corbyn declined to sign.

- In January 2020, challenged directly about Assange at a Stop the War Coalition rally called to oppose the war drive against Iran, Corbyn scowled and walked away.

The dead end of the official Don’t Extradite Assange/Free Assange campaign

It must be stressed here that this silence was never criticised by those who became the leading figures in the Don’t Extradite Assange campaign. On the contrary, at the end of 2019, at a public meeting in London, Tariq Ali claimed that a Corbyn victory was Assange’s “only hope” of freedom and that nothing should be done to publicly challenge Corbyn’s silence that might open him to attack from the right, and risk defeat in the

December 12 General Election.

Only once Corbyn was on his way out of the Labour Party leadership was the Don't Extradite Assange campaign set up, with a remit of channelling all ongoing protests under the wing of the Corbynites and their pseudo-left apologists.

Corbyn made his first statement on Assange in February 2020, just weeks after he was challenged at the Stop the War rally. This began his elevation as the figurehead of the official campaign, where he has championed polite appeals to everyone from Boris Johnson to Joe Biden to see the light and let Assange go.

A real campaign for Assange's freedom would not beg for but demand that he was freed by the British Prime Minister and the American President—to not only expose them before the workers and young people but to mobilise a mass movement against them.

The same goes for all the appeals to and hopes expressed in the supposed integrity and sense of justice of the British courts: "some judges who are prepared just to be decent," in the words of Tariq Ali.

As far as the official campaign has sought to win broader support, it has been among sections of the political establishment, or celebrity figures as a route to the establishment. What they have to show for this work is a small collection of parliamentary representatives, in Britain, Germany, Australia and elsewhere who make pro-forma statements committing them to nothing and which they know will have about as much effect on Biden and Sunak as a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

Then there are the media organisations and NGOs, who are mostly concerned with covering up their filthy record on Assange with insincere statements of opposition to his extradition. This includes PEN International and PEN UK, but not PEN USA which has said nothing. And the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), who did not mention Assange between 2014 and the issuing of a mealy-mouthed, two paragraph statement following his brutal seizure from the Ecuadorian Embassy.

The trade union bureaucracy, it should be said, has done nothing.

A model resolution was drawn up in 2020 by the NUJ calling for a campaign to free him, consisting of writing letters to the Home Secretary, Shadow Home Secretary and Shadow Justice Secretary: respectively Priti Patel, Starmer's close friend Nick Thomas-Symonds, and the now warmongering facilitator of the Gaza genocide, Starmer's current Foreign Secretary David Lammy.

This "campaign" naturally died on the vine.

Assange and imperialist war

I want to be clear on this point. We do not make this criticism to engage in political point scoring. We have no need. We have fought continually for Assange's freedom, year after year, when others abandoned him. And we were the only political party to do so.

We concern ourselves with these rotten and unprincipled individuals and organisations only in so far as the politics they advocate and the role they play has dangerous consequences for the campaign for Assange's freedom and for the fate of the entire working class.

We have said that the fight to free Assange is the fight against war. What do we mean by this?

Assange's persecution has not been motivated simply by the bad intentions of a few powerful individuals. It is dictated by the fundamental interests of imperialist powers driven to engage in war after unpopular war, coup after coup to secure their positions in the world pecking order, run by governments widely despised and which view their populations with fear and loathing.

We are living in a world where, for the last two years, the NATO powers have been arming the Ukrainian government against a Russian invasion they both provoked and wanted. The aim was to send Ukrainian workers to die in battle in an attempt to weaken, pressure and depose a Putin administration viewed as an obstacle to their own God-given right to exploit Russia's immense natural resources, and to further their war plans against Iran and China.

In furtherance of this new imperialist carve-up, Europe is being remade into an armed camp, with plans for conscription, national service and the doubling and tripling of defence spending.

This is a war which threatens direct conflict between nuclear-armed powers, in which leading spokesman for Washington, London and Paris declare their readiness to play nuclear Russian roulette with Putin even in face of the threat of annihilation.

The willingness of the ruling class to sacrifice human life in pursuit of its interests has already been confirmed most glaringly and brutally in Gaza, where the imperialist powers are materially supporting the genocide of the Palestinians, taking notes from the Israel Defense Forces on urban warfare, and seeking an opportunity to mobilise a carefully cultivated anti-Iran axis against Tehran and its allies in Lebanon and Syria.

Under these conditions, journalism which determinedly exposes their criminal activities cannot be tolerated. Because it threatens to fuel and spark oppositional movements from below, in the working class and among young people.

As we wrote in 2020 after Assange's main extradition hearing in the UK, "The imperialist powers intend to make truth the first casualty of new and even bloodier wars and regimes to come."

That has been bloodily confirmed in the last two years. In a recent Perspective article on Assange, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained:

"The attempt to brutally silence journalists that began with Assange has now led to a policy of mass murder. Over 100 media workers and many of their family members have been killed by the Israel Defense Forces in the space of just four months, in a clear campaign of targeted assassinations to stop the truth of the genocide being reported.

"In Israel, Britain, the United States, Europe and throughout the world, draconian legislation is being used to criminalise anti-genocide protests, with thousands arrested."

The Perspective noted Assange's declaration in 2011 that "If wars can be started by lies... peace can be started by truth." And it listed some of the wars since then and the lies used to justify them.

These include Ukraine, where the NATO powers claim to be defending "sovereignty" and "democracy" by working with fascist forces to drag the population into a fight to the last Ukrainian in an attempt to kill as many Russians as possible.

And Gaza, where the sickening invocation of Israel's supposed "right to self-defence" sanctions collusion in the mass murder and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians.

The whole spectrum of imperialist politics is implicated in this unfolding catastrophe. There is no faction of the capitalist political elite putting forward a policy to end war and defend democratic rights like freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

Just as with the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the road to Assange's freedom lies elsewhere.

War, democratic rights and the working class

As we wrote in a subsequent Perspective: "The forces arrayed against Assange by the UK and US states are powerful. But there is another, even more formidable force which has yet to have its say—the British, American

and international working class.”

The task we face is this: we, and I include everyone here tonight, must devote our energies to convincing the working class of the burning relevance of the Assange case for its own interests, and of the need for them to take up the fight on his behalf.

This means cutting through the mountain of lies and slanders and breaking out of the narrow confines in which the official campaign for Assange’s freedom has been confined. It means going to the workers, to the younger generation of workers and students in particular, fighting to clarify the essential political issues raised and outlining a strategy on which to fight back.

The fact that the United States is pursuing Assange under the Espionage Act is historically revealing. As we wrote four years ago:

“The precedents for Assange’s trial under the Espionage Act are the mass roundups of socialists and anarchist groups carried out in the years after the law was first established in 1917. Fearful of the revolutionary movements swelling across the world, the US government outlawed political opposition to the First World War and agitation for workers’ strikes and protests.

“Assange’s case is preparation for a similar assault on the working class.”

That is now being played out. Sunak’s government is seeking to make standing up for the truth of what is happening in Gaza a crime to try and crush the growing anti-war movement. His extremism definition is part of a pattern of governments preparing for war not only with their opponents abroad, but with what they see as the main enemy—the working class at home. It joins laws attacking the right to strike, protest and blow the whistle on state crimes.

The ruling class are preparing for a clash they know is coming because their policies, above all their war policies, cannot be pursued except through a further assault on already gutted living standards and state provision. Assange’s case has been the canary in the coalmine for these preparations.

Opposing war and defending democratic rights are the vital questions confronting the international working class today and that struggle must have Assange’s freedom inscribed on its banner. It must learn from his case to prepare for the battles ahead.

In conclusion, I will be blunt: we have lost a lot of time. This really is the 11th hour for Julian Assange and for everything his case represents. We cannot start from a position of pessimism in our ability to build a mass movement. What I hope this speech has demonstrated is the potential for such a movement, and how it has been thwarted not primarily by the attacks of Assange’s enemies but by the rotten perspective of those who were supposed to defend him.

A break with that perspective will prepare the way for a broad campaign, embracing the most energetic and principled fighters in their workplaces, neighbourhoods, and universities.

In the last years the Socialist Equality Party has collaborated with workers including bus drivers, postal workers, teachers, and tea plantation workers, and with students, in the UK, Australia, the United States, Germany and Sri Lanka to form rank-and-file committees which have all passed resolutions in Assange’s defence. We have held rallies in all those countries.

To those here today we say: join us in this campaign and in the fight for socialism against dictatorship and war. And join the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: