

Young people speak at UK public meetings on fight to free Julian Assange: “It should be a focus for this generation”

Our reporters
28 March 2024

Public meetings held this month in Britain by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) provoked important discussion among workers and young people on the campaign needed to free WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. The meetings in London, Sheffield, Manchester and Inverness were addressed by SEP national secretary Chris Marsden and assistant national secretary Tom Scripps.

Assange, who exposed war crimes by the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been imprisoned in London without charge for well over a decade. He faces imminent extradition to the United States under trumped-up Espionage Act charges that carry a 175-year prison term.

Young people and workers who attended the meetings spoke to World Socialist Web Site reporters afterwards.

London

Toby, aged 34, said, “The urgency couldn’t be higher in terms of people’s need to stand up against imperialism and the violence being committed both on a personal level against Julian Assange and in a wider sense the people of Gaza, who are being bombarded by an American-backed ally.

“One of the most striking things coming out of the original WikiLeaks publications was the Collateral Murder video showing 18 civilians being gunned down by US Marines from an Apache helicopter. Exposures like that sent shockwaves around the world and politicised a lot of people and galvanised the anti-war movement at that time.

“These were truths that exposed the nature of American imperialism and UK complicity. It exposed the motivations and the reasoning behind the war crimes we were seeing, the human cost of these imperialist ventures in the Middle East.”

Toby said the WikiLeaks exposures, “all combined to build a picture in people’s minds of the American imperialist project as one of violence and injustice, wreaking chaos in people’s lives. Suddenly there was this evidence, this paper trail, and it galvanised people against the war.

“The US government has been trying to punish Julian Assange to send a message that if you expose us in this way, if you expose the truth about what we do around the world, then we will come after you and we will destroy your life. It’s a very dangerous message for anyone who believes in any kind of democracy or freedom of speech.”

Toby said Scripps’ report to the meeting had revealed those responsible for blocking a mass movement in Assange’s defence, “The damage was done initially and fuelled by the mainstream media, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and other publications which had previously published the WikiLeaks material and then turned-on Julian Assange.

“You mentioned Jeremy Corbyn. He was leader of the Labour Party during the time Julian Assange was at the Ecuadorian embassy in London under house arrest. When he was taken to Belmarsh prison, Corbyn didn’t

raise his voice. He obviously considered it too politically inconvenient or wanted to appease the right wing and the Blairites within the Labour Party. He lost his voice on this issue at a time when it could have galvanised a mass movement in support of Julian Assange.

“It comes back to your point, that what the *World Socialist Web Site* and the party are trying to do is inspire a mass movement of working-class people to stand up for Julian Assange, as a movement from below that is organised and ready to bring a real fight to these powerful institutions and powerful structures, rather than appealing to the state, writing letters to members of parliament, and sort of hoping that the courts can resolve this when time and time again it’s proven that they don’t respond in that way. These are politically motivated charges and it’s naive to expect the reprieve to come from within the state, which is very much responsible for the conditions Julian Assange faces.”

Carmella, a student at Kings College London, attended the meeting with a friend. She said: “It’s such an important and urgent topic. I wonder how to engage more university students, high school students even. My friend is 22 years old, and he can’t remember who Julian Assange is.

Carmella has followed WikiLeaks revelations, but said, “What I didn’t know about was so many in the media first claiming he was a good-doer, and then turning on him. I hadn’t thought of that, it’s overwhelming and very moving. It was very well synthesised.

“And I think it’s very important for us to know that the mainstream ‘left’ might not be ‘left’ anymore. Like with AMLO [Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico’s president]. Mexicans voted for something and then at the end of the day he’s taking decisions not in line with the initial apparent ideology. So, I think it is a worldwide phenomenon, and it’s important to speak of it.”

Campaigning for London’s meeting was focused at SOAS and Birkbeck universities. Thousands of leaflets were distributed, alongside copies of a new pamphlet, *The Fight to Free Julian Assange*, and a new book by David North, *The Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to the Gaza Genocide*.

The day before the meeting, members of the pseudo-left Socialist Worker Student Society at SOAS were challenged by an SEP member about why their organisation has been virtually silent on Assange’s case for the best part of a decade. A campaigner claimed the party had written “lots” on the case, before declaring, “we think it is more important to focus on defending the organisation, not the person”.

Assange has been subjected to a murderous gang-up by the imperialist powers in the heart of London, while SWP members provide sophistries about defending WikiLeaks but not Assange! The SWP has played a central role in the demonisation of the WikiLeaks founder, promoting discredited sexual assault allegations concocted by the Swedish state and the CIA. On the day of the SEP’s public meeting in London, Socialist

Workers Student Society members covered up a poster advertising the meeting. The event name and venue details were concealed by an SWP poster for their “festival of Marxist ideas” in July.

Sheffield

Zara, from Sheffield, is active in the protests against the genocide in Gaza. She said: “I found the meeting interesting and informative. I have followed his case as many people have. There’s much more awareness now we’re in the eleventh hour. I agree with everything you say about turning to workers and younger people, who need to be made more aware.

“Hearing the facts brings the reality and urgency of the message more directly. I’ll take the message back to my family and friends and encourage them to keep Assange in their minds and do what they can. I believe we have to speak out.

“I don’t read many papers, but I may have been drawn to *The Guardian* and what happened to Julian made me worry about their reliability. You’ve got to remember that there’s no unbiased newspaper. I’ll sign up to the newsletter of the *World Socialist Web Site* instead.”

George, a journalism student at University of Sheffield, came to the meeting to interview Thomas Scripps as part of his journalism course and stayed for the report and discussion.

He explained, “I have always been interested in Assange’s story. I didn’t see the socialist perspective before this meeting.

“I got a lot out of the meeting. I wasn’t aware of just how many exposures WikiLeaks was involved with, such as the Guantanamo Bay torture exposures. I knew of the collateral murder video but there were so many other areas.

“I think Assange should be free. It is disgraceful what has happened him. As a student journalist, I’m scared of what western countries are doing. They are censoring and bending the rules to suit themselves. They say you have freedom of speech, but then they have ‘exceptions’ on reporting war crimes. These are topics that can’t be approached and that is worrying.”

Manchester

Gary said the meeting “certainly opened my eyes”. During the Q&A session, he asked how the left could come together “like they did in 2015 to 2019” (when Corbyn was Labour leader) and win Assange’s freedom.

Speaker Chris Marsden explained how Corbyn had capitulated to the right-wing in the Labour Party—including his refusal to fight for Assange’s freedom, alongside his backing for NATO, Trident and accepting a free vote on the bombing of Syria, and his rejection of any challenge to the bogus anti-Semitism witch-hunt against the left. “He rolled over without a fight, and he paved the way for Sir Keir Starmer”.

Pam, who attended the recent march in Doncaster to mark the 40th anniversary of the miners’ strike, said a united left was needed. The solidarity of the working class during the miners’ strike meant the strike ended in victory, she said. Marsden said the strike ended in a terrible defeat, with mass redundancies and impoverishment, a product of the bankrupt perspective championed by the National Union of Mineworkers under Arthur Scargill’s leadership which did not challenge the betrayal of the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress.

A group of young workers attended from Greece. **Kostas** said, “We are here for Julian Assange, and we need to work for his freedom... just as the people in Gaza want their freedom.”

His friend said, “There isn’t a unity of leadership, for Gaza or Assange... but the main goal is to overthrow capitalism. The issue is, how does the working class come together and explain that their individual problems are a common issue, so that they understand they have a common root cause.”

Concluding the meeting, Marsden explained the role of Syriza, an alliance of pseudo-left forces which betrayed the mass opposition of the Greek working class to austerity in 2015-19. Marsden said: “The working class always strives for class unity, it’s not a concept we have to

introduce. What do you do when you achieve unity? We must have a socialist perspective to mobilise independently of and against the parties of capitalism.”

Inverness

Adele, 23, a cleaner, said: “I support the SEP’s call to action for workers and young people. The fight for Assange is a fight for freedom of knowledge and information. His silencing proves there are things the state wishes to hide from the population.

“Freedom for Assange and the struggle against war are tied together, and the defence of democratic rights is a socialist struggle.”

Andrew, 23, who is a chef, said: “Workers and young people coming forward to defend Assange is an integral part of forming a serious anti-war movement. We desperately need people like Julian Assange to shed light on the atrocities happening across the globe. If revealing war crimes is a crime, then what else is kept from the public eye and not shown?”

Lucy, 22, a cleaner, said: “It should be a focus for this generation to organise and defend Assange. Allowing Assange to rot in jail is allowing the ruling class to prepare more crimes. We cannot rely on this political establishment to rescue Assange. The working class must do this itself.

“Capitalism is currently accelerating towards World War III and it is vital that all anti-war figures who are exposing this are defended. I found Chris’ report very helpful to bring light to all of this! It was very encouraging to see a meeting that deals with this situation so carefully, in a format that allows for such a serious and important conversation and that was attended by so many different people.

“People from the Palestine protest in Inverness attended, young people attended, older people too. I think it demonstrated the ability to unite the anti-war movement with all layers of the working class.

“The meeting demonstrated the need to struggle for socialism in the fight for democratic rights and against war. This system cannot be reformed and it’s in the best interests of workers to go independently against the political establishment and fight for workers’ power!

“Every area of life is being attacked by capitalism, our wages, our living conditions. Workers face an era of nuclear war because of capitalism. It’s not something just for the future, capitalism is attacking us now, so we have to fight for socialism now!”

Theo, 25, is a chef and said: “The work done by WikiLeaks to expose human rights violations, war crimes, and corruption within governments is monumentally important as it exposes capitalism for what it is, an oppressive system, where the rich and powerful will do anything to retain their power over workers.

“The Socialist Equality Party made the case well that workers and young people are the only force that can free Julian Assange.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)