

“Free Julian Assange! Oppose imperialist war!”—Leading SEP (UK) member addresses meeting in Australia

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The following speech was delivered by Thomas Scripps, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to a meeting entitled “Free Julian Assange! Oppose imperialist war!” held online and in Sydney by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) on May 26. A full report of the meeting is published here.

Let me begin by saying I’m sure I’m speaking to an audience of people very familiar with the course of the Assange case: The many steps in his persecution, the twists and turns of the legal case, up to this past Monday when he was granted a right to appeal against the order for his extradition to the United States.

Australia is perhaps the country with the highest level of awareness of Assange’s situation and the significance of his case, in substantial part due to the activity of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia.

Given that assumed level of knowledge, I want to begin by speaking about the legal case in overview—the key issues, as they’ve been advanced by Assange’s legal team and as they’ve emerged in the back-and-forth with lawyers for the US government.

You would not know it from the slim and disinterested coverage in the corporate media, but the full extradition hearing held in September–October 2020 was an extraordinary legal and political event.

I was observing and reporting proceedings for the *World Socialist Web Site* for each of the four weeks or so that it ran; I hope I’ll be forgiven for citing myself in reading out some of the article we published summing up proceedings.

We said:

The four weeks of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange’s extradition hearing were a watershed in the collapse of democracy and the descent of world imperialism into abject criminality.

Three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unchecked explosion of US militarism, and two decades after the declaration of the “war on terror,” not a single legal principle, democratic or basic human right, is left standing...

While Assange sat in the dock charged with “espionage,” the crimes he exposed were recounted by defence witnesses. Their phrases hung in the air of the courtroom, an indictment of the whole capitalist order:

“collateral murder” (the wilful killing of unarmed and injured civilians);

“extraordinary rendition” (the illegal seizure of untried persons and their disappearance into “CIA black sites”);

“enhanced interrogation” (with torture delivered against “hooded and chained” subjects via beatings, “sodomy,”

“controlled drowning” and the use of “coffin boxes”);

and “wars of aggression”—the crime for which the Nazi leaders were indicted at Nuremberg—leading to the sociocide of Afghanistan and Iraq and the deaths of up to one million people.

The judge in that court, as you will know, ruled against extradition, but on the sole ground that it would be oppressive by virtue of Assange’s mental health, in particular the risk of suicide. Every other reactionary legal argument advanced by the United States was accepted.

As we explained at the time, this served three purposes. First, it provided the fig leaf of due legal consideration to the UK courts and government. Second, it left Assange’s fate hanging by a single thread that US lawyers could cut in the appeal process. Third, it narrowed the focus of that long appeal process to Assange’s mental state, excluding the political issues that are really at the heart of this case.

More than three years later, that has finally been partially reversed. The two grounds for Assange’s appeal at the next hearing are centred on the denial of his right to free speech or freedom of publication as a journalist, protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

The lead US prosecutor has openly stated that Assange could be prevented from raising that protection in his defence at trial in the US, and this was explicitly endorsed and defended by the US government lawyers on Monday.

As we wrote in our summary of proceedings: “Here is US imperialism’s case stripped bare: That it can use the Espionage Act to seize journalists it deems a threat to its national interests and try them without key legal and democratic protections.”

We have moved, in other words, to some of the substantial issues in this case: the assault on press freedom and the denial of basic democratic rights. The fact that it has been brought to this stage reflects, in part, the strength of the case mounted by his lawyers, which has been excellent throughout.

But—and this is the crucial point—we cannot view any step in the Assange case as a purely legal question and in isolation of its political context, which is ultimately decisive.

Citing again from our report of Monday’s hearing:

The last time a decision went in Assange’s favour against the grain of the case was the initial refusal of extradition on January 4, 2021. At that time, the future of the US government was in turmoil, with Biden’s replacement of Donald Trump challenged by an attempted coup and the storming of the Capitol building just

two days later.

Another political crisis is raging now. Biden is hemorrhaging support over his backing of the Gaza genocide, ahead of another presidential election contest with Trump in November. There will be a faction of opinion in the White House happier to see a delay in proceedings against Assange rather than the rapid arrival of another potentially explosive political issue for the Democrats, as the WikiLeaks founder is dragged through the US courts.

However, such considerations grant nothing more than a delay—and a prolonged detention under intolerable conditions in Belmarsh. Nor are they a guarantee against sections of the US state as happy to trample publicly over Assange's democratic rights as they are the rights of students protesting the slaughter of the Palestinians.

All of which is to say that relying on the legal process alone to free Assange would be disastrous.

If legal and democratic rights had been properly observed and acted upon by the courts, Assange would never have been imprisoned in the first place, either in Belmarsh or in the Ecuadorian embassy. The fact that he was is testimony to the essential function of the capitalist courts as instruments of the ruling class and state policy.

It should be noted here that although the question of free speech is now back under discussion in the UK courts, the issues that remain excluded include threats against Assange's right to life—that is, the exposed plots for his assassination; the clear political motivation behind his prosecution; and numerous violations of his rights to fair legal treatment.

We can only speculate why this latest ruling has gone in Assange's favour. But we can say two things for certain:

- To put it mildly, there is no guarantee that the appeal hearing will find in his favour—however overwhelming the legal merit of his case.
- That this next phase of the legal proceedings provides a vital opportunity—in terms of time, and by foregrounding the key political issues involved in Assange's persecution—to build a mass movement in his support.

To that task, his supporters in every country on the planet now have to turn their attentions and their most determined energies.

I hope it's already partially clear from what I've said that we are not speaking about a campaign of purely moral pressure to bring out President Biden's better nature.

It is, of course, entirely correct, as Assange's supporters have done, to demand that Biden abandon the persecution of Julian Assange. But such an outcome can only be the result of an overwhelming popular movement, not the pricking of the president's conscience.

Speaking outside the High Court on Monday, the former leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, told reporters:

My message to President Biden is this: You call yourself a Democrat. You walk in tradition, some of which is a good tradition, of people that stood up. Those that stood up over Watergate, those that stood up against the Vietnam war, those that stood up for the Civil Rights movement. That tradition is, as he knows, alive and well in many parts of the USA. Join that tradition, drop the appeal, free Julian.

The first thing that has to be said is that this is an account of Democratic Party history that will be unrecognisable to the exploited and oppressed in the United States and around the world—it's in keeping with his career-long whitewash of the record of the Labour Party in the UK.

But focussing on the perspective it advances for Assange's freedom, to call this naïve would be overly generous. In reality, it is pulling the wool over the eyes of Assange's supporters about the struggle they face.

Biden leads an administration that has declared war on the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court for even investigating the charge of genocide in Gaza and seeking arrest warrants for Israeli leaders Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant.

Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken has pledged to work with far-right Republican members of Congress to sanction the International Criminal Court for its actions.

And in the United States itself, the Democratic Party is carrying out an unprecedented, brutal crackdown on students peacefully protesting the Gaza genocide. There have now been roughly 3,000 arrests carried out nationwide in a series of violent police raids, not to mention the expulsions, cancelled graduations and so on.

Of course, we've had the same response from Assange's jailors, the government of the United Kingdom.

The persecution of Assange is not some accident or, as many among the official Assange campaign tend to present it, an unfortunate and inexplicable hangover of the Trump presidency; it is part and parcel of this crackdown on democratic rights and opposition to imperialist war.

In fact, as we have argued from the beginning, Assange was targeted to punish the exposure of past crimes in preparation for even bloodier crimes in the future, like those now being carried out by Israel. He is viewed with the same violent hatred as the 150 or so journalists killed in Gaza.

And it is not only Gaza. The imperialist powers are risking unimaginable destruction with their continued escalation of the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, whose population is being slaughtered on the sacrificial altar of the US drive for regime change in Moscow.

Back in the Middle East, the imperialist powers are ready to leverage Israel's genocide into a regional war directed against Iran itself, along with Russia, a stepping stone to the defining conflict of our era between US imperialism and China.

We tried to make this point as clear as possible to readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* when Assange took his appeal to the High Court this February. We published an article headlined: "The fight to free Assange is the fight against war!" And in it, we wrote:

The case of Assange embodies the struggle against imperialist war, the authoritarian measures used to suppress anti-war sentiment and the propaganda lies used to justify it all.

He was targeted by Washington and London for publishing leaked documents detailing the crimes of the US government and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their conspiracies with dictatorships around the world. Assange sought to warn the population of the brutality the ruling class was capable of...

Those warnings are now being daily and horrifically confirmed by the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, where hundreds of thousands have likely lost their lives, and in the Israeli genocide in Gaza, already responsible for at least 30,000 deaths, mainly women and children. Both are rooted in the drive by the imperialist powers for a new redivision of the globe, its people and its resources, which marks the ever-deeper descent into a third world war.

The persecution of Assange, which includes a CIA assassination plot and which has ravaged his health and stolen over a decade of his life already, has been the spearhead of a crackdown on opposition to war, in preparation for the eruption of military violence now underway. It was intended to set a chilling precedent that anyone who gets in the way of the war plans of the imperialist

powers will be silenced and destroyed.

That point has to be made very sharply at this point in time. For years now, the policy of the official defence campaign has been to appeal to various figures in the establishment as the liberators of Assange, from presidents to prime ministers, to politicians in various national parliaments, media organisations, and NGOs.

The most criminal form this perspective has taken has been the embrace and elevation of figures who, in an earlier period, contributed to Assange's persecution by maligning him or remaining silent on his treatment. The likes of the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, who published countless vile slanders, and of Jeremy Corbyn, who kept a complicit silence over Assange's plight throughout the entirety of the two general elections he fought as Labour leader.

What all of these people and organisations have in common is a politics premised on imperialism's supposed capacity to see reason and its supposed concern for peace and legal rights. Their professed opposition to Assange's persecution, where it is not purely for the record, is circumscribed by a total opposition to any struggle which seriously threatens the interests and stability of the imperialist states.

And, consequently, the years of leadership by the official campaign have been years in which Assange has been left at the mercy of his captors, his voice silenced and his work through WikiLeaks cut short.

We have argued from the beginning, and we repeat today, that Assange's real liberators are those with the sharpest interest in overturning the imperialist world order and defending democratic rights and with the social power to do so: the international working class and youth. Today, we are not pointing to a purely potential force but a real movement that is underway.

Millions have demonstrated all over the world against the crimes being carried out in Gaza, with the complicity of their own governments. This is an event contributing to a profound radicalisation of wide layers of workers and young people.

As some of you may know, a snap general election was called in Britain this week. We now have an extremely short campaign period, barely more than a month, before the nation goes to the polls on July 4.

The Socialist Equality Party will be fielding candidates, myself included, and we will make the fight for Assange's freedom a centrepiece of our campaign.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak himself trailed his party's election campaign by warning, "The world is closer to a dangerous nuclear escalation than at any point since the Cuban missile crisis" and indicting "an axis of authoritarian states like Russia, Iran, North Korea and China."

In our initial response to his election announcement, we wrote, "The fundamental issue facing the working class in this election is war and the offensive against social and democratic rights this demands." Assange is at the heart of those issues; we will make that plain.

In particular, we will wage an offensive against the current leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer—the overwhelming favourite to win this election—who played a direct and essential role in Assange's persecution as head of the Crown Prosecution Service during his effective house arrest in the Ecuadorian Embassy.

A final point, hopefully without treading on the toes of the speakers to come, before I finish. We have held events—in-person and online meetings, rallies, protests, street campaigns and so on—in Assange's support for years. And we frequently hear from people who are with us all the way on this issue—see its importance, its urgency, feel something should be done—that nothing can be done because we don't have the power to do so.

Well, the answer is very simple: We need to create that power. And we need to do so by the only means known to human history, which is the

organized application of time and effort.

If you are convinced by what you hear today—if you were convinced coming into the meeting, even—then now is the time to act, to make yourself available. Get in contact with the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* where you are; say, "I want to do my bit for Assange. I want to be part of the campaign." And we can discuss with you how best you can contribute, in collaboration with ourselves and others.

However the legal case now develops, more than five years in a maximum-security prison, twelve years deprived of his liberty, is outrage enough to make freeing Julian Assange our urgent responsibility and it is only made more so by the conditions of worsening war and escalating geopolitical conflict with which his persecution is inextricably intertwined.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact