

Australian filmmaker James Ricketson demands the release of Bogdan Syrotiuk

Our reporters
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Australian filmmaker James Ricketson has issued a statement demanding the freedom of imprisoned Ukrainian socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk.

Ricketson's films, which have focussed on social issues and marginalised communities, include Reflections (1973), Roslyn and Blagica Everyone Needs a Friend (1979), Blackfellas (1993), Born in Soweto (1994) and Sleeping with Cambodia (1997).

In 2017, Ricketson was arrested in Cambodia where he was making Chanti's World, a planned documentary about a girl growing up in Phnom Penh. In a transparent frame-up, he was accused of "spying for a foreign country," imprisoned for 15 months, found guilty and sentenced to six years in jail. He was pardoned and repatriated to Australia in September 2018, after protests in Australia and a 100,000-strong petition demanded his release.

Since then, Ricketson has become a vocal defender of political prisoners and press freedom, lending his name and experience to campaigns on behalf of figures such as Julian Assange and in opposition to the Gaza genocide.

Syrotiuk was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment last month, on bogus "treason" charges based solely on articles he had written for the World Socialist Web Site. While opposing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Syrotiuk exposed the Zelensky regime as the authoritarian proxy of the US and NATO, in their aggressive confrontation with Moscow. He fought for the unity of Russian and Ukrainian workers on a socialist program.

Ricketson sent the following statement:

The prosecution and jailing of 27-year-old journalist Bogdan Syrotiuk is contrary to the precepts of freedom of speech that should apply in Ukraine. I write as a

filmmaker/journalist who spent 15 months in a maximum-security prison in Cambodia on espionage charges that were demonstrably false. I was eventually sentenced to six years in jail despite the total absence of evidence of my guilt.

It took over a year for the Australian government to go public in its defence of my legal and human rights. This did not occur until the Australian media took an interest in my case. Three weeks after receiving my sentence, all charges against me were dropped and I was deported from Cambodia.

I write also as a supporter, from afar, of Ukraine's efforts to repel the invading Russian army. This, however, is beside the point. Bogdan Syrotiuk, as I understand it, has done nothing more than express opinions critical of the Ukrainian government. He has not spread pro-Russia propaganda.

I am disappointed, to say the least, that a critic such as Bogdan has received any jail sentence at all, let alone fifteen years. My own experience suggests that this excessive sentence has a dual purpose—not just to punish Bogdan, but to intimidate other Ukrainian journalists and critics of the government.

All countries, including my own Australia, that are supporting Ukraine must let the government know that Bogdan must be released immediately. We in Australia are engaged in a seemingly never-ending battle to protect our right to speak freely. It is a fight we must all engage in all the time.



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