

Assange is being punished for exposing state secrecy and the reality of war

By Linda Tenenbaum
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SEP national committee member and former SEP assistant national secretary Linda Tenenbaum chaired the rally to free Julian Assange held by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia on June 17 at Sydney's Town Hall Square. Her introductory remarks to the event are below.

I'd like to welcome all of you and commend you for taking the decision to attend this highly significant rally, all the more so because the situation facing Julian Assange, and our efforts to defend him, are being subjected to an ongoing media blackout, not only in Australia but around the world.

At the outset, I'd like to send the warmest greetings, on behalf of everyone here today, to journalist Julian Assange and his colleagues in WikiLeaks. Our greetings also go to journalists and workers in every country who are fighting government, military-intelligence and corporate efforts to suppress their democratic rights and intimidate them into silence.

For the past 12 years, Assange and his media organisation WikiLeaks, have provided the means for whistleblowers to expose the real nature and extent of imperialist criminality; government lies, censorship and deceit; horrific war crimes and their cover-up, and, at immense personal cost, defied all attempts at intimidation and threats aimed at stopping the ongoing flow of explosive information.

In recent weeks, Julian's persecution has intensified. All his communications have been cut off in what is an act of pure vindictiveness. Just imagine what his life has been like, stuck in a tiny room for the past six years, with no access to fresh air or sunlight, with a host of medical conditions for which he has been denied any treatment. He can't reach for his mobile phone and speak to his friends when he wakes up each

morning. Or send them a text message. He can't take a walk outside in the sunshine. He is a journalist who has no access to a computer, to information, to social media, to the outside world.

Now Julian faces the imminent threat of being driven out of the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he was granted political asylum in 2012, as his only alternative to being extradited to Sweden and then on to the US. If he is forced to leave the embassy now, the British government will arrest and jail him, and then prepare his extradition to the United States, where he will likely face Grand Jury charges of espionage, which carry the death penalty.

We have organised this rally to begin the fight to build a powerful defence campaign in Australia, New Zealand and internationally, that will bring together all those committed to democratic rights—the right of journalists to inform the population, *their* right to freedom of speech, and the right of everyone to be informed. These are issues of the most fundamental character. The suppression of the truth, of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, goes hand in hand with the destruction of democratic rights.

That is why we welcome the support and participation of everyone here, and all those to whom we must now reach out, who are committed to the fight for democratic rights. We encourage discussion, debate and the exchange of views with anyone and everyone who agrees with this.

Today, this rally is demanding of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government that it act urgently, and immediately, to secure Julian Assange's release. We are demanding that the Australian government uses its diplomatic power and legal discretion, under both international and Australian law, to insist that Britain allow Julian to return to Australia, unharmed and

unimpeded, and with a transparent guarantee against extradition to the United States.

In the cases of both Peter Greste, the Australian Al Jazeera journalist who was jailed in Egypt for reporting the truth of the situation in that country, and David Hicks, the Australian imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay, under false claims that he was a terrorist, the Australian government utilised its diplomatic powers to secure their release and repatriation.

Why not Julian Assange? Because he is being punished for lifting the veil of state secrecy; for revealing the reality of war, and the terrible crimes committed in its name; for disabusing hundreds of millions of workers and young people around the world of their naïve and dangerous illusions in governments, political parties and politicians.

No less than five countries, Australia, Sweden, the United States, Britain and now Ecuador have been involved in the conspiracy to silence Assange and extradite him to the US. All of them have trashed his democratic right to freedom of speech, and the democratic rights of his audience to hear, see and read what WikiLeaks has published.

Julian Assange is an Australian citizen and, as such, he has definite democratic rights. *But Turnbull and every one of his parliamentary colleagues are cowards! They stand for nothing!* They will have to be forced to act in Assange's defence, by the power of the unified movement for democratic rights that we are initiating here.

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