

The working class and the fight to free Julian Assange

23 February 2019

Since June 19, 2012, that is, for 3,000 days, WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has lived as an effective prisoner inside the small Ecuadorian embassy in London, deprived of direct sunlight, adequate medical treatment, and, for the past year, even the ability to communicate with the outside world.

Assange, a courageous journalist and publisher, is being ruthlessly hounded by the American state and its global lackeys because he helped expose the crimes of US imperialism and ruling-class criminality and corruption all over the world. His persecution is the spearhead of a global offensive against freedom of speech and to censor oppositional voices on the internet.

Assange was forced to seek political asylum with Ecuador after the British courts upheld a warrant to extradite him to Sweden on manufactured accusations that he was under “suspicion” of sexual assault.

Assange and his defenders correctly assessed that as soon as he was detained in Sweden, the US Justice Department would issue its own extradition application to have him hauled to the United States. Assange faced, and still faces, the danger of being put before a show trial in the US on false charges of espionage.

Millions of working people rightly see Assange as a champion of the freedom of speech. Pseudo-left organisations, such as the International Socialist Organization, *Jacobin* magazine and Socialist Alternative, however, have either abandoned him or joined the herd of intelligence agencies and imperialist propaganda outfits demanding his arrest and extradition.

They have turned against Assange as part of their lurch to the right and alignment with imperialism following the eruption of revolutionary movements of the working class in Tunisia and then Egypt in 2011. The entry into politics of the working class terrified the

privileged sections of the upper-middle class, which has enriched itself as a result of the destruction of workers’ conditions over the past three decades or more.

The backlash was most sharply expressed in the milieu of organisations that falsely claim to be socialist. These groups supported the US-led military intervention to overthrow the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and then the US-backed Sunni Islamist extremist organisations that provoked a sectarian civil war in Syria against the secular regime headed by Bashar al-Assad.

The Australian organisation Socialist Alternative denounced criticism of their support for the US-backed Syrian Islamist “rebels” as “knee-jerk anti-imperialism.”

While the pseudo-left lined up with neo-colonial operations in the Middle East, they also fully embraced the conscious turn by the ruling elite internationally to divide and disorientate the working class through the state promotion of gender and identity politics.

The American Socialist Alternative, for example, had declared in December 2010 that the accusations against Assange were a frame-up and “shameful.” By August 2012, it completely flipped, asserting that the claims “must be investigated” and “US imperialism’s hunt for Assange does not mean he is innocent.”

The demands by these groups that the public “believe” accusations against Assange that were a transparent frame-up—and which have been dropped as the basis of criminal prosecution—parallel the right-wing #MeToo movement, with its disregard for fundamental democratic principles such as the presumption of innocence and right to due process.

It was impossible for organisations and individuals to align with imperialism and elevate identity politics issues, while continuing to proclaim support for Julian

Assange and WikiLeaks—whose very existence is viewed as a threat by the ruling class.

It was one thing for WikiLeaks to expose the war crimes committed under the despised Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was quite another for independent and critical media to publish information that helped inspire mass revolutionary upheavals that brought down governments and threatened the capitalist profit system itself.

But while these right-wing organisations continue their silent complicity in Assange's persecution, support for the journalist is growing among workers, young people, and all those committed to the defence of democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) is organising demonstrations in Sydney on March 3 and Melbourne on March 10 to demand the freedom of Assange. The rallies will insist the Australian government end its collaboration with the persecution of one of its own citizens and intervene immediately, using the full weight of diplomatic and legal powers, to compel Britain to allow Assange to leave the Ecuadorian embassy and return to Australia.

The SEP demonstrations have won important support from principled individuals, publications and organisations that defend democratic rights. These include filmmaker John Pilger and civil rights advocate Professor Stuart Rees, who will both be speaking in Sydney on March 3. It also includes singer/songwriter Roger Waters, independent journalists' Chris Hedges, Elizabeth Vos and Joe Lauria, and the broader WikiLeaks defence movement that fights for the freedom of Assange.

In its defence of Assange, the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, in the face of a global onslaught against democracy by the ruling elite, that the working class is the powerful, mass force for the defence of democratic rights.

All over the world, from teachers in the United States to auto parts workers in Mexico, to public sector workers in India, the working class is engaged in a wave of strikes and struggles. As this strike movement expands, it must, and will, increasingly raise political demands. Among the most important will be for freedom of expression and the right to know the truth. The fight to free Julian Assange is vital to the defence of democratic rights. It will be taken up by masses of

workers in the coming struggles.

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