

On the spot report: Protest outside Westminster Magistrates Court demands freedom for gravely ill Julian Assange

By our reporters
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Around 100 people demonstrated outside Westminster Magistrates Court Thursday morning to oppose US extradition proceedings targeting WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Yesterday's procedural hearing would have been the first since the US Department of Justice levelled 17 additional charges against Assange under the Espionage Act, carrying a prison term of 175 years. But the hearing was postponed, with Assange's lawyer Gareth Peirce confirming her client was too ill to attend.

Assange has been transferred by prison authorities to HM Prison Belmarsh hospital and was unable to appear even via video-link. Since he was illegally seized by police from the Ecuadorian embassy in London, Assange has been held virtually incommunicado in the maximum-security prison. He is serving a 50-week sentence sadistically imposed by the courts for a minor bail infringement in facilities normally reserved for terrorists and organised crime figures.

In court, Gareth Peirce told judge Emma Arbuthnot that Assange was "not very well." But nothing is to be allowed to stand in the way of the British judicial establishment, which is hellbent on facilitating Assange's extradition. Arbuthnot announced the next hearing would take place on June 12 or a day either side at Belmarsh Magistrates Court, or even in Belmarsh prison.

Outside the court, supporters of Julian Assange made their presence felt with a determined protest organised by the Julian Assange Defence Committee (JADC) and supported by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). They chanted slogans including "US, UK – Hands off Assange!", "There's only one decision—No

extradition!" and "Telling the truth is not a crime—Free Julian Assange."

Homemade placards included "Free Assange, Jail War Criminals," "Free Julian Assange, Nobel Peace Prize Nominee" and "Free Press, Free Assange." Banners and placards from the SEP demanded freedom for Assange and jailed whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Opening the rally, the JADC's Emmy Butlin told those assembled, "The judge acknowledged that Julian Assange has not been well. Obviously, we are extremely concerned about reports in the press about his health and that he is currently at the hospital ward of Belmarsh prison. Our thoughts and prayers are with him."

Butlin appealed for maximum attendance at the next month's hearing and introduced each of the other speakers.

Independent video blogger Gordon Dimmack read aloud the letter he had received from Julian Assange the previous week and received applause as he cited Assange's words, "until I am free, everyone must take my place."

Chris Marsden, National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party said, "A legal abomination took place in this court today. An innocent man is being railroaded to the United States for extradition... Julian Assange is desperately ill and is in a medical ward in Belmarsh prison. Nothing will stop the brutality of the British state in its efforts to collude with the United States to silence Julian Assange. We have to stop this. The way to stop it is to mobilise the massive power of the working class, to end this travesty, this crime against journalism, against truth, in the struggle against war.

Marsden concluded, “We speak for millions all over the world who are defenders of Julian Assange, defenders of WikiLeaks and defenders of the truth... Everything depends upon the mobilisation of workers, young people against the establishment, against the mainstream media, against the parties of big business and for a genuine mass movement against war, colonialism and oppression.”

The JADC’s Maxine Walker told demonstrators, “We are here today to stand with Julian Assange. In standing with him we are standing for what? We are standing for truth, we are standing for freedom, and we are standing for democracy. And what are we standing against? We are standing against the imperialist war machine that has done everything in its power to demonise and destroy Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. The secrecy, the lies of the war machine of the imperialist countries. Their murder, their torture, their rendition, their coups and their wars. That is what WikiLeaks revealed to us.

“We have chosen a side. We have chosen the side of justice. And the tyrants and the psychopaths who rule the world are doing everything in their power to destroy Julian Assange, physically and mentally to lock him up forever, to bury him and make an example to other people if you take that stand for truth, this is what will happen to you. That is why this struggle is so vital.”

As the rally concluded, demonstrators lined the footpath facing Marylebone Road, holding their placards and banners high. With traffic flowing heavily in both directions, dozens of London bus drivers, truck drivers, cabbies and tradesman sounded their horns loudly, waving to demonstrators in a sustained show of support. This was the voice of the working class—the powerful social force that will win Assange’s freedom.

After rallying outside the court, a group of demonstrators decided to picket the offices of Amnesty International and the *Guardian*. They denounced Amnesty’s refusal to list Assange and Manning as prisoners of conscience and protested the *Guardian*’s relentless defamation, slander and character assassination of the WikiLeaks founder and journalist.