

Greater Manchester Unite community branch hears report on fight to free Julian Assange

By our reporters
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UK Socialist Equality Party national committee member Linda Slattery addressed a November 26 meeting of the Greater Manchester Unite Community branch on the international campaign to prevent WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's rendition to the US.

In September, the branch took a principled stand by passing a resolution demanding the immediate release from prison of Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

An audience of more than 20 listened attentively as Slattery reported the growing public concern over the plight of Assange and his declining health. She explained, "On Monday, a group of 65 eminent doctors in the UK and across the world issued an open letter calling for urgent action to defend the life of this courageous investigative journalist. They warn that if Assange is not moved from Belmarsh prison and treated urgently in a university hospital, 'he could die.'"

The doctors addressed their open letter to Home Secretary Priti Patel and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott. "A typically sadistic statement issued yesterday by Patel said, 'The allegations Mr Assange was subjected to torture are unfounded and wholly false. The UK is committed to upholding the rule of law and ensuring that no one is ever above it,'" Slattery noted.

Slattery added, "Abbott has issued no response. Neither she nor Jeremy Corbyn have mentioned Assange's name once during the course of the general election campaign."

Dr Stephen Frost, a specialist in diagnostic radiologist, began the doctors' initiative at the end of last month after reading the disturbing account given by ex-diplomat and whistleblower Craig Murray of Assange's appearance at London's Westminster Court in October. Slattery explained. He "realised that under conditions where the media and the entire political establishment were either participants or complicit in the persecution of Assange, he had to act."

The medical doctors have backed the findings of UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer "that Assange is the victim of prolonged psychological torture at the hands of five states—the US, Ecuador, the UK, Australia and Sweden. Melzer and other experts are now warning there is a real danger Julian might die in prison," Slattery explained.

"For years the US government denied it was preparing charges against Assange. A state frame-up was organised with bogus rape allegations in Sweden for the sole purpose of blackening his reputation," she continued. "This frame-up now lies in tatters. Last week Swedish prosecutors were forced to drop their latest 'preliminary investigations' into Assange because there is not a shred of evidence against him."

Millions of working people know that "Assange has been targeted for exposing US war crimes and massive state corruption—crimes in which the UK state was itself complicit," Slattery stated. "It is this kind of journalism which the Trump administration, backed by the Democrats and by the UK and Australian governments is trying to criminalise. They fear the growth of mass opposition."

This month "a petition signed by over 200,000 people calling for Assange's freedom was tabled in the upper house of the Australian parliament." Slattery noted that the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in its June 20 call for a global defence campaign that the persecution of Assange is the "spearhead of a massive assault on democratic rights, aimed at destroying freedom of speech, illegalizing investigative journalism, intimidating and terrorizing critics, preventing the exposure of government crimes and suppressing mass popular opposition to social inequality and war."

She told the audience, "Of course, as Labour Party members, you face a serious political challenge. While Diane Abbott spoke out strongly in defence of Assange

when he was seized from the embassy on April 11, and Corbyn issued a single tweet opposing US extradition, they were immediately attacked by the Blairites who control the PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party].

“They quickly backed down. Assange’s persecution does not even figure in the Labour Party’s manifesto.

“Assange faces extradition proceedings on February 24 next year. As the doctors say in their letter, Assange’s ‘medical condition is urgent. There is no time to lose.’

“Assange himself has made the call for nurses, transport workers and others to form blocs in their unions and workplaces to campaign for his release. Assange and Manning will be freed, not by moral appeals to governments but by a mass mobilization of the working class.

“Unite should be called upon to campaign actively among its more than one million members for Assange’s release. They have not even mentioned him on their website, yet this is an issue that will profoundly affect the democratic rights of the entire working class.

“We urge everyone at this meeting to become actively involved in the fight for Assange’s freedom.”

Afterwards, a Unite member urged a vote for Corbyn in the upcoming election, saying, “If we elect a Jeremy Corbyn government, there is at least a chance that Julian Assange will be given a decent legal protection in this country.”

In reply Slattery said, “We pinpoint the lack of support on the part of Abbott and Corbyn and the Labour Party for Assange because we are saying to working class people you have to rely on your own strength, you can’t rely on governments, we have got to take our lead from what these doctors have done. They’re not waiting on elections or governments; they’ve seen the seriousness of Assange’s condition and they know something must be done now.

“The working class is coming back into struggle all over the world, in Hong Kong, Chile, rail and university workers in this country. It’s that powerful force we must turn to.”

After the meeting, Steve said, “Corbyn’s supposed to be on the left. I’m quite mad really because I’ve always voted Labour. It niggles me that he’s not looking into things like Assange. He’s just turned his head away. It’s a disgrace.”

Geoff, who has written to Assange in solidarity, said, “I find it astonishing that the Labour movement are not more vociferous. The National Union of Journalists should have a much stronger role. I wrote to Amnesty

International UK about what they’re doing about Julian Assange. I’ve yet to get a reply.”

“The doctor’s initiative is absolutely necessary. I support Assange because he’s exposed the crimes of imperialism. It’s a question of democratic rights. It’s criminal what’s being done to him,” Evan said.

“Assange is facing state murder. The state is determined to sacrifice his life in order to intimidate all investigative journalists, prevent the working class knowing the truth, and to stop any challenge to the current climate of lies and false news. The Labour Party needs to support Assange. Julian must be released immediately,” Evan declared.

“It’s very impressive how many doctors there are from many countries supporting Assange, in terms of releasing him and giving him the best possible treatment,” John noted. “He’s been kept in isolation for so long, he’s had medical care denied him by the government. The state is slowly killing him and the fact that it hasn’t been on national television or appeared in the election campaigns is an absolute disgrace.

“It says a lot about the political leaders in this country that they are prepared to kill someone who doesn’t agree with their ideas, someone who exposed some really bad crimes by American imperialism... If they can do it to Assange, they can do it to anybody. This is softening up the population for detention. We’ve already got a British ex-general saying that if there’s a Corbyn government they would treat them as terrorists because they don’t trust them to defend British capital. This is organised state cruelty. It really needs a huge mass movement to defend Assange and Manning and it’s starting to build up now.”

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