

French public sector strikers call to free Julian Assange

By Alex Lantier and V. Gnana
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As they marched in yesterday's French public sector strike against the regressive social policies of the European Union (EU) and President Emmanuel Macron, many strikers told WSWs reporters they supported the widely-known, imprisoned founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange. Their remarks pointed to the deep support that exists for Assange in the working class around the world, and the need to mobilize this support in a struggle to free him.

James, a salesman protesting pension cuts in Paris, denounced the fact that Assange is held without any legal motive in Belmarsh prison in London, for having revealed the truth about the US occupation of Iraq. He said, "It is impermissible to hold someone locked up in such conditions, only because he has revealed and opposed war crimes. In Iraq there were so many things to be exposed, the lies told by (US President George W.) Bush and Company. So how can one detain a man under such conditions? It is intolerable."

He added that ruling circles clearly "are absolutely terrified because he has files implicating American intelligence. I hope that everything will be done to support him throughout the coming period."

James stressed the interest that Assange has provoked among workers in struggle in France: "An entire delegation of 'yellow vests' went to London last month, precisely in order to support Julian Assange."

Sandrine, a kindergarten teacher marching in Paris, said with Assange's detention, "it is the freedom of opinion that is under threat. It is truly sad, but unfortunately in many democracies one could think that freedom of speech exists, but this is not the case. So I am fighting, yes, both for freedom of expression and for my job."

Several protesters said they were angry and disgusted that France, under the presidency of the Socialist

Party's (PS) François Hollande, refused Assange political asylum. The mother of Assange's youngest child was living in France, and Assange had requested asylum from Hollande in a column published by the daily *Le Monde*.

Jérémy, a marcher demonstrating in Marseille, told the WSWs, "France should have brought Assange here. The crimes he revealed were enormous. That he was locked up in the Ecuadorian embassy for so long without obtaining asylum here outrages me."

Corinne, who is unemployed but came to protest the pension cuts and who is a member of a group defending Assange, said, "He is someone who has defended France. France did not give him political asylum, the government did not even listen to him. Everyone is trying to make things move on this issue, but nothing is changing. Above us there is a pact of silence... Because I shared articles and petitions about Assange, now I am constantly blocked on Facebook."

She added, "The French press, as is well known, is owned by all those billionaires. So apart from independent media that interview us during protests, for example, and who spread the information, otherwise the public will hear nothing."

Corinne stressed the fundamental importance of the Assange case and a defense of truth and freedom of expression for workers entering into struggle in France and internationally. "I am a worker, in the street to defend workers' interests and change a system that does not pay attention to them and simply tries to make money from exploiting them."

To carry out such a struggle, workers need the type of truthful information that Assange and WikiLeaks published, Corinne explained. "He is a journalist who accepts to publish the truth about what states actually do, for example. I think you must have heard of the

Collateral Murder video, a famous video of US war crimes in Iraq. But that is not the only thing. He published diplomatic cables, and he always protected the whistleblowers who provided him with this information.”

She continued, “Julian Assange is essential for our society. Otherwise, the truth is not brought into broad daylight. We can see that today in France, in fact, we do not have the right to protest. The proof, our march is blocked by police. There are water cannon, riot police, police assault squads, plainclothes cops infiltrating the demonstration, they are trying to muzzle us. Freeing this man would strike a blow for our freedom, it would mark the beginning of our freedom.”

Corinne insisted on the need for a struggle to liberate Assange, who is imprisoned, alone, threatened with extradition to America and targeted by the full weight of all the NATO powers: “There he is trapped in Belmarsh prison, a high security facility created for terrorists. He has no rights, not to defend himself, no access to libraries. He is psychologically tortured. UN officials have made that clear in numerous reports, and recently a network of doctors have signed a petition.”

She added, “The principal accusation against Assange will not be published until they get him on American soil. There, he would face 175 years in prison and probably the death penalty. And this man is in a truly horrific state of health. He was someone who was very quick, very intelligent, but now he is gradually dying.”

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