

Julian Assange arrives in Australia free

Oscar Grenfell
26 June 2024

In remarkable scenes last night, Julian Assange arrived in Australia a free man. Stepping out of the airplane in the national capital, Canberra, the WikiLeaks founder raised his fist before embracing his wife Stella Assange and father John Shipton.

At a press conference shortly after, Stella hailed a global support movement for having played a decisive role in securing Assange's release. At the same time, she warned of an escalating assault on press freedoms, expressed in the fourteen-year persecution of her husband.

Earlier in the day, Assange appeared in a US federal court in Saipan, capital of the Northern Mariana Islands in the west Pacific.

The court signed off on a deal under which Assange pled guilty to a single count of violating the American Espionage Act. The arrangement represented a victory for Assange and a backdown by the US state, which since 2019 had been seeking to prosecute the WikiLeaks publisher on 17 Espionage Act charges carrying a maximum 170-year sentence.

Having announced his plea, Assange was asked by the judge if he understood what actions he had taken that resulted in the charge. In a powerful act of defiance against the US persecution, he replied: "Working as a journalist, I encouraged my source to provide information that was said to be classified in order to publish that information."

Pointing to the body blow against press freedom that the case always represented, Assange added:

I believe the First Amendment protected that activity, but I accept that it was a violation of the Espionage statute. I believe the First Amendment and the Espionage Act are in contradiction with each other, but I accept that it would be difficult to win such a case given all the circumstances.

The bipartisan assault on the First Amendment, the central protection of free speech and freedom of the press in the US, underscores a turn towards authoritarianism bound up with massive social inequality and an eruption of imperialist war globally.

There was a notable comment from Judge Ramona V. Manglona. In accepting the terms of the plea deal, under which Assange is sentenced to time served during his incarceration in Britain's Belmarsh Prison, Manglona stated:

There's another significant fact—the government has indicated there is no personal victim here. That tells me the dissemination of this information did not result in any known physical injury.

For years, the US government justified its pursuit of Assange with bogus claims that WikiLeaks' publications placed lives at risk. While previously acknowledging they would not identify any supposed victims, US authorities hinted darkly at dire outcomes stemming from the WikiLeaks releases. The admission before a court of law that no such victims ever existed again exposes the frame-up character of the entire US case against Assange, which was always based on lies.

In a desperate and pathetic attempt to cover this over, the Department of Justice issued a statement immediately after the proceedings stating that even if no one had been harmed, they could have been.

At the Canberra press conference, US lawyer Barry Pollack confirmed that there are no gag provisions under the plea deal, as there can sometimes be in such arrangements.

Pollack declared:

The case against him is over. It is a case that never should have been brought. I hope we never have another case like it. He has sacrificed greatly for all of us—for freedom of the media, for freedom of speech.

Stella Assange said that Assange's release "took millions of people, it took people working behind the scenes, people protesting on the streets, for days and weeks and months and years, and we achieved it." It was this that had created the "space" for negotiations with the US Department of Justice, the eventual plea deal, and the involvement of the Australian authorities under the current Labor government to facilitate it, she said.

Highlighting the toll that the US pursuit has taken on her husband, Stella stated:

Julian wanted me to sincerely thank everyone. He wanted to be here, but you have to understand what he has been through. He needs time, he needs to recuperate and this is a process.

Explaining the factors underlying the US backdown, Stella said: “It’s important to recognise that Julian’s release and the breakthrough in negotiations came at a time when there had been a breakthrough in the legal case in the UK.” The High Court had agreed to allow Assange to appeal extradition, in hearings that would have occurred on July 9 and 10.

That was the first major legal victory for Assange in years of proceedings for his extradition from Britain to the US. Since the beginning of 2021, US prosecutors, aided by the British judicial authorities, had curated hearings in such a way that the substantive issues in the case had not been the subject of court proceedings.

Stella explained that in his July appeal,

Julian would have been able to raise the First Amendment argument at the High Court. It is in this context that things finally started to move. It revealed how uncomfortable the United States government is in having these arguments aired.

That was because “this case is an attack on journalism, it’s an attack on the public’s right to know, and it should never have been brought. Julian should never have spent a day in prison.”

In follow-up comments, Stella said that while “[today] we celebrate Julian’s freedom,”

[It’s] also a day where I hope journalists and editors and publishers everywhere realise the danger of this US case against Julian that has secured a conviction for newsgathering and publishing information in the public interest that was true and that the public deserved to know.

That had established a “precedent” that “can and will be used in the future against the rest of the press.”

There was a move towards fewer protections for freedom of the press, not more, she warned. The only “good outcome” in the case would have been if it had been abandoned by the Biden administration. That not having occurred, all journalists were “in as vulnerable a position as Julian has been.”

Directly addressing the assembled media, Stella pointedly stated that this had to be resisted through a struggle by all who defend press freedom. Such a “mobilisation” from journalists and publishers “should have happened years ago,” she stated. The fact that it did not had “resulted in this conviction.” Assange would be fully pardoned only if “the press unite to push back against this.”

Stella and Assange’s lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, thanked the Labor government for its role in the ending of the case. Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese held a press conference last night, presenting his administration as having played an important part in the outcome.

Albanese, however, confirmed last year that in his limited representations to the US about Assange, he was not asking the Biden administration to drop the prosecution entirely. That helped

create the conditions where Assange could only be freed through a guilty plea.

The plea deal was, above all, the result of tactical considerations by the Biden administration. It was fearful of further exposures of the criminality of the prosecution and the prospect of extradition inflaming mass anger and opposition amid a deepening political crisis in the US.

As a WSWs editorial board statement explained yesterday:

Though Assange is free, the global capitalist offensive against democratic rights is only accelerating. For every tactical retreat by imperialism, there is a more brutal counterattack.

In Australia, as in the US, the government is overseeing a venomous crackdown on opposition to the Israeli onslaught on Gaza. Whistleblowers are being prosecuted. David McBride, for instance, was sent to prison last month with the support of the Labor government for having exposed Australian war crimes in Afghanistan, including the murder of civilians.

The WSWs statement noted:

The basic underlying conditions behind the persecution of Assange—global war and extreme levels of social inequality—not only persist, they are intensifying.

That underscores the fact that “the struggle for democratic rights must be rooted in the working class and connected with the fight for socialism and against imperialist war.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact