

# Open letter demanding MEAA fight to free Julian Assange presented in Melbourne

*By Davey Heller, May 15th 2019*

On May 3rd, World Press Freedom Day, campaigners to Free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning visited the office of the Media union in Melbourne (MEAA) to present a [letter](#) signed by respected Australian and international journalists and media workers. The letter demanded that the MEAA do everything in its power to advocate on behalf of their member, Julian Assange, and also urged them to issue a statement condemning the re-jailing of Chelsea Manning. The letter was presented after a protest outside the Melbourne UK Consulate as [part of a day of action](#) called to stand up for Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and other targeted whistleblowers and journalists.

The three campaigners who attended the office discussed these demands with two paid officials of the MEAA, Mark Phillips Director of Campaign Communications and Adam Portelli, Regional Director Victoria and Tasmania.

## THE MEAA breaks its 8 year silence

The [letter](#) was written before Julian Assange's arrest, at a time when the MEAA had been silent on the persecution of Assange since 2011. The MEAA has broken its silence on the persecution of Julian, their recent deeds include:

- Publishing a [letter](#) to the Australian and UK Government one day after Assange's arrest opposing the extradition.
- Promoting the [statement by the Walkley Foundation](#) via National President Marcus Strom's twitter on April 17th opposing the extradition.
- Marcus Strom appearing in the days after April 11th on Australian media to discuss the unions opposition to his extradition, including this [interview on The Project](#).
- The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), of which the M.E.A.A. is affiliated, passed a [short motion on May 2nd](#) stating that:

*"The IFJ Executive Committee supports our Australian affiliate MEAA in its opposition to US moves for the extradition of Julian Assange. Any extradition, and prosecution by US authorities, would be a clear attack on the principles of press freedom. We call on the UK and Australian Governments to oppose any US extradition application."*

## **The ambivalence of the MEAA and the "question" of whether Assange is a journalist.**

All of these actions are welcomed and strengthen the arm against all who claim that the Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning's persecution have nothing to do with press freedom or journalism. These actions, however, fall far short of the letter's central demand that the MEAA do "everything in its power" to fight for Assange's freedom. In fact it is clear the union bureaucracies at the MEAA and IFJ are ambivalent in their support for this campaign.

The M.E.A.A for example is yet to issue a press release on the position it has adopted. It did not mention Assange and

Manning in any of its World Press Day activities. The Statement from the Walkley Board does not seem to have been promoted via more than one tweet from Marcus Strom on April 17th and is entirely absent from the Walkley Foundation's own twitter feed. Marcus Strom also failed to reply to an invitation to endorse or participate in the May 3rd Rally in defence of Assange in Melbourne.

There has also been ambivalence in both the written and public statements from the MEAA. Strom and the union insist that whether Assange is a journalist or not is a "moot point". Their contradictory position is that Assange's prosecution threatens press freedom, yet it is unclear whether he is a journalist! Their position is made even more ridiculous by their acknowledgment that Wikileaks and Assange are being targeted solely for publishing truthful information in the public interest, provided by a whistleblower, in cooperating with major media outlets in 2010. It is also very unclear why Assange has been admitted into the MEAA media section since 2007 as a member if he is not practising journalism. It is also ludicrous that the MEAA would accept that a propagandist who works for Murdoch, or an auto-cue reading TV presenter meets the criteria of a journalist but somehow Assange does not make the grade.



Marcus Strom  
@strom\_m

Following

Me on Assange in @SBSNews. Whether he is a journalist or not is a moot point.

[sbs.com.au/news/julian-as](https://sbs.com.au/news/julian-as) ...

"He is a divisive character and that's why for us it is not about him as a personality. It is not about what he has done since," he said.

"It is about the principles around publishing information in the public interest and being pursued for that. It is solidly around that principle and that is why we're calling on the Australian and British governments to oppose the extradition.

"Not because it is Julian Assange, but because of the principle of being able to publish information in the public interest."

6:49 PM - 12 Apr 2019

The entire supposition that Assange is not a journalist is based on a false premise that no curating occurs in the Wikileaks publications, and that the information is not managed and merely dumped online. However, perhaps the most famous Wikileaks publication is the edited 17 minute video entitled "[Collateral murder](#)" which shows the gunning down of two Reuters journalists and other civilians in Iraq. A cursory glance of the Wikileaks posts labelled "[Vault 7](#)" shows the interpretative information that Wikileaks provides as well as a list of the media partners, such as Der Spiegel, with which Wikileaks worked on the publications. The documentary [Mediastan](#) released in 2013 shows the journalistic work of both Assange and Wikileaks in seeking media partners in Central Asia to publish material related to the "Cablegate" releases.

Wikileaks has also worked in partnership with many other media outlets, including those such as the Guardian and New York Times, who later turned on Wikileaks.

This is a reason that Wikileaks and Assange have won so many journalism awards, including, most recently, the [2019 GUE/NGL Award for Journalists, Whistleblowers & Defenders of the Right to Information](#), awarded by the EU Parliament after Assange's arrest.

Of course what offended so many mainstream journalists is that Wikileaks has published swathes of documents online that the international working class can read for themselves. Italian investigative journalist Stefania Maurizi in a recent [interview](#) discusses how Wikileaks changed journalism, not just through the importance of what it revealed and its pioneering collaborative media partnerships, but also by the fact that when it publishes:

*“ WikiLeaks made these files fully accessible to everyone, so that every journalist, every activist, every scholar, every citizen can be empowered by this information free of charge. That is the revolution”*

To these gatekeepers of the powerful, this commitment to transparency and a belief that the ordinary person has the right to make up their own minds, challenges their role of deciding what the public should and shouldn't be allowed to see. This was explicitly stated in a reprehensible [article](#) by Australian journalist Peter Greste published after Assange's arrest in which he contemptuously stated “Journalism demands more than simply acquiring confidential information and releasing it unfiltered onto the internet for punters to sort

through. It comes with responsibility". Greste seeks to add to the slander of the recklessness of Wikileaks. However, even the U.S. military could not provide one specific example of a person being killed due to releases that resulted from Chelsea Manning's whistleblowing.

## **Why the MEAA must defend Assange as a journalist and publisher.**

The MEAA is fundamentally wrong regarding the question as to whether Assange is a journalist or not is a "[moot point](#)", as it lies at the heart of the political conspiracy against him. This is why when Julian was asked on May 2nd via video link from Belmarsh super maximum prison whether he would voluntarily accept extradition to the U.S. he replied:

*"I do not wish to surrender myself for extradition for doing journalism that has won many, many awards and protected many people,"*

This is also why the U.S. has charged Assange with a "conspiracy" to access a government computer by allegedly trying to crack a password. It is trying to distance Assange as much as possible from the field of journalism and to associate him with a criminal world of hacking. This is to obscure and legitimise their blatant attack on journalism and somehow find a way to legally distinguish the actions of Assange from those of the Guardian and New York Times, who also published the material from the Manning leaks.

However if one examines the indictment of Assange directly, it quickly becomes apparent how wafer thin this fig leaf is. It

clearly describes a journalist doing no more than trying to help a source hide their anonymity, standard practice for a responsible investigative journalist. Paragraph 19 [states](#):

*“It was part of the conspiracy that Assange and Manning took measures to conceal Manning as the source of the disclosure of classified records to WikiLeaks, including by removing usernames from the disclosed information and deleting chat logs between Assange and Manning.”*

In this context it is unforgivable for the MEAA to dismiss as a “moot” point the question of Assange’s status of a journalist. It plays right into the hands of his persecutors and helps pave the way politically to jailing Assange for life, or worse, for being a “spy” and a ‘hacker”.

Whilst Marcus Strom might think this is a pragmatic way of dealing with the opposition of some elements within the MEAA to Julian Assange in effect it is a cowardly adaption to that part of the journalism profession that has surrendered their principles and enthusiastically joined the persecution of Assange.

The MEAA also cannot use these journalists as a smokescreen to hide that its position is aligned with the ALP, a party which, like the rest of the trade unions, it is closely linked and subservient to. The ALP has thrown itself fully behind U.S. persecution of Assange and its imperialist project more broadly. This was demonstrated by then Labor PM Gillard, back in 2010, declared, with no legal basis, that Wikileaks and Assange, through publishing U.S. State Department cables, was “guilty of illegality”. Bill Shorten himself was revealed within the Cablegate documents to have [visited the U.S. Consulate in 2009](#) to spruik his future suitability to the U.S.

as a future Prime Minister.

The ambivalence of the MEAA was evident in the demeanour of the MEAA officials who accepted the letter. Whilst they expressed no hostility to Assange and were happy to speak with us, they repeatedly emphasized how he was a "divisive" figure within their membership and they could only repeat the M.E.A.A policy of opposing his extradition to the U.S. They were too nervous to even be photographed holding up a sign in support of Assange.

## **The defence of Assange and Manning must be an issue for the whole working class.**

Demands must continue to be made for the MEAA to publicly mobilise its membership in defence of Assange and Wikileaks, not only because his prosecution threatens press freedom globally, but because they must make the case that this is an industrial issue for the whole labour movement and, indeed, the whole working class.

If the campaign to jail Assange and Manning continues for their exposure of U.S. War Crimes through the work of Wikileaks, then a massive blow will have been struck against the free press and the working class right to have access to the truth. The attack on these political and democratic rights of the working class would be a blow against all the efforts of the working class to advance themselves politically and economically. Workers and trade unions do not fare well in advancing any of their concerns under authoritarian or, indeed, fascist dictatorships. The defence of Assange must be inscribed on the banners of all the struggles of the working class.

Classconscious.org does not seek to sow delusion that a letter signed by respected journalists and a visit to their offices will cause the MEAA to jump on board in such a campaign. The links of the bureaucracy to the Labor Party, and the position of many journalists in relationship to the ruling class, are a barrier to such a development.

Therefore, journalists within the MEAA must speak out to demand that their union does more regarding the issue and expose them if they do not! Journalists outside the union must also organise and speak out on this issue. Rank and file organisations of journalists must be created that can include union and non union media workers to raise this issue as a central industrial and free press issue.

Currently, numerous honest journalists are using their social media platforms and writing articles in support of Assange. This includes journalists such as Phillip Adams, Mary Kostakidis, John Pilger, Peter Cronau, Lissa Johnson, Andrew Fowler, Jeff Sparrow, Bernard Keane, Chris Gramam and Helen Razor, amongst others. Their impact, however, would be magnified if they were working collectively under a united banner of "Journalists for Assange". Such a rank and file organisation of journalists will have to be created in the absence of real leadership from the MEAA.



 **Mary Kostakidis**  
@MaryKostakidis

Following

Do other journos really want to see [#Assange](#) in an Alcatraz for life when they have published his leaked docs, continue working without fear of prosecution and, in some cases, brandish their journalism prizes while denouncing the man who made them possible



**Julian Assange Languishes in Prison as His Journalistic C...**  
While Julian Assange languishes in south London's maximum security Belmarsh Prison, a British court is weighing his fate. The 48-year-old Australian founder of Wikileaks is serving time for ...  
[charlesglass.net](http://charlesglass.net)

9:19 PM - 13 May 2019

151 Retweets 218 Likes



Rank and file journalists and media workers, along with all workers both within and outside unions, should, wherever possible, move motions in support of the defence of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning as an issue of press freedom and in defence of the rights of the whole working class.

So whilst [classconscious.org](http://classconscious.org) demands more action from the MEAA and pledges to expose them if they fail to mobilise their members, workers and youth should not wait for the union bureaucracies to lead, but take the power into their own hands and fight internationally to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning!

*Please contact [classconscious.org](http://classconscious.org) at [ClassConscious@protonmail.com](mailto:ClassConscious@protonmail.com) if you want to get involved in*

*building the campaign to mobilise media workers in defence of  
Julian Assange.*