



MEDIA RELEASE

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World Press Freedom Day 2024: another year wasted

Another World Press Freedom Day has arrived without any significant reforms by any level of government to improve press freedom in Australia, says the union for Australian media workers.

Despite some positive rhetoric, the Albanese Government is yet to act on a backlog of reforms including to national security laws, freedom of information, whistleblower protection and defamation.

At the same time, journalists ability to do their jobs of informing the public is being undermined by media organisations who have kowtowed to external pressures.

MEAA Media Federal President Karen Percy said that with a federal election likely within the next 12 months, time is running out for the Albanese Government to lock in the reforms it promised when in opposition.

Without government action, Australia is unlikely to improve its standing on global press freedom rankings, where it stood 27th in 2023.

“When whistleblowers are prosecuted for revealing wrongdoing by governments and corporations; when defamation is weaponised to prevent scrutiny; when information that should be publicly available is inaccessible or wrongly marked top secret; and when the basic role of journalism is criminalised on ‘national security grounds’ – then it is the public who loses out,” Percy said.

“MEAA has consistently called for reforms to protect whistleblowers from prosecution, to reduce the barriers that prevent Freedom of Information laws from working effectively, and to review the encroachment of national security concerns into everyday journalism. Evidence from working journalists is that the threat of prosecution or being sued has a chilling effect on journalism that impedes the public's right to know.

“But despite some positive rhetoric, we are yet to see much in the way of real reform from any level of government in Australia. There is some hope that a review currently underway of national security legislation in relation to the Criminal Code may yield some positive results.”

Percy said it had been disappointing over the past year to see media organisations themselves undermine freedom by failing to live up to appropriate ethical standards and buckling to external pressure when the work of their staff has come under attack.

“Employers have censored, disciplined, and in at least one case, sacked journalists in response to external criticism and intimidation from unaccountable lobbyists, politicians or big business who want to control the narrative on important issues of public interest.

“This has a chilling effect on other journalists that they too may be punished for stepping out of line, forcing them to compromise on their duty to the public to report the truth without fear or favour.”

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Percy noted that 2024 will be the sixth World Press Freedom Day that Australian citizen and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has spent in Belmarsh Prison near London.

“Beyond our immediate and urgent concerns for Assange’s health and wellbeing, his extradition and prosecution by the United States would set a disturbing global precedent for the suppression of press freedom and would constitute an assault on the public’s right to know.

“It would mean that any journalist, anywhere in the world, could be charged and extradited for handling any information that the US government classifies as ‘secret’.

“The only real and conceivable path to freedom for Assange is for the US government to discontinue its prosecution.”

On World Press Freedom Day 2024, MEAA also pays its respects to about 100 Palestinian journalists who have lost their lives in the current conflict in Gaza. Dozens more have been wounded or are missing.

Twice as many journalists have been killed in Gaza under the Israeli offensive than were killed worldwide in 2022.

MEAA stands with the International Federation of Journalists in condemning the targeting or deliberate murder of journalists.

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