

WikiLeaks founder granted bail, but remains incarcerated

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15 December 2010

Amid extraordinary scenes at a London magistrate's court, Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks was granted bail but then sent back to prison after the prosecution lodged an appeal. This Orwellian situation demonstrates beyond a shadow of doubt that the proceedings against Assange are of a politically motivated character. A political vendetta is being waged against him because he has dared to publish the truth about the crimes of American imperialism.

A cheer went up from a crowd of supporters, penned across the street by police, as news filtered out that Assange had been granted bail on onerous terms of ?240,000, with the added conditions of surrendering his passport, obeying a curfew at an address in Suffolk, wearing an electronic tag and reporting to a local police station every evening.

But instead of walking out a free man, he was kept in the cells below the court. The judge let it be known that the Swedish authorities had two hours in which to lodge an appeal against the granting of bail. Later Assange's lawyer Mark Stephens emerged from the court to explain that Swedish prosecutors had indeed lodged an appeal that would be heard by the High Court within 48 hours.

Assange was whisked away in a prison van, arriving back at the grim Victorian prison at Wandsworth in southwest London where he has been held in solitary confinement for the last week.

Stephens told reporters, "They clearly will not spare any expense to keep Mr. Assange in jail. This is really turning into a show trial."

It is impossible to dissent from that judgement. A man who has been charged with no offence, still less found guilty of any crime, has been deprived of his freedom.

The Assange case amounts to a parody of legal

procedure.

This latest episode involves a repudiation of the principle of habeas corpus that has been established in English courts since the 17th century. Assange has been detained without charge in Britain, so that he can be extradited to Sweden where he has not been charged but simply faces questioning over allegations of sexual misconduct of a spurious character.

Assange reportedly faces allegations of "unlawful coercion" during a consenting sexual act and failure to use a condom on this and another occasion with another consenting partner. Assange denies all allegations against him. So flimsy is the case against him that Swedish prosecutors initially threw it out.

That the Swedish authorities decided to reopen the case against Assange—and the English courts first denied him bail and then agreed to keep him in prison even after doing so—is explicable only as the product of massive pressure exerted behind the scenes by Washington. It is widely predicted that if sent to Sweden, Assange will then be shipped on to the United States where, as the *World Socialist Web Site* reported yesterday, a grand jury has already been secretly empanelled.

The treatment meted out to Assange is confirmation of the rapid slide toward police-state measures taking place worldwide.

The extradition warrant under which Assange was detained was introduced after 9/11. It was claimed that it was necessary to speed up extradition proceedings in terrorist cases. But Assange has no connection to terrorism. The warrant has been used to silence someone who has exposed imperialist crimes; in an effort to intimidate others, curtail freedom of speech and gag the media.

Assange's legal team has not even been told precisely

when the appeal will take place. This reflects the practice that has characterised the entire case, keeping them in the dark and placing every obstacle possible in their path.

Even after he has been held in prison for a week, the charges against him have still not been officially disclosed. It is questionable whether the alleged offences would be prosecutable under English law, but without detailed material it is impossible for his lawyers to challenge the case. “We still have not been given the material and the evidence to allow Mr. Assange to understand the nature of the charges against him,” Stephens said. This was despite a call by Judge Howard Riddle that the defence be allowed the necessary material.

Last week Assange’s defence were given just nine hours to arrange the sureties that Judge Riddle required before he would grant bail. The bail conditions that were finally granted to Assange this week are extremely stringent.

Vaughan Smith, a former British army officer who has worked as an independent cameraman in war zones and is the founder of the Frontline Club, offered his own address to the court for Assange. It had to be pre-approved by police. Smith is one of a number of prominent people who have expressed their support for Assange and offered to stand surety for him. They include the Nobel Laureate Sir John Sulston, who was responsible for mapping the human genome.

Bail was set at £240,000, but only £40,000 of this sum is a surety. The other £200,000 must be paid up front in cash. Even the wealthiest of Assange’s supporters would have difficulty raising £200,000 in cash at a moment’s notice. “We’re putting the begging bowl out,” Stephens said.

If bail were paid by cheque, Assange would have to remain in prison for seven days while it cleared.

“It’s a pity he can’t use MasterCard or Visa,” Stephens remarked with black humour. “Until then we have an innocent man sitting in Dickensian conditions in Wandsworth gaol.”

Assange is being held in the same prison in which Oscar Wilde was confined. A recent report by the prison inspectorate referred to “a climate of fear” that exists in Wandsworth. Assange has spent the last seven days in the prison punishment block, locked in his cell for 23 and a half hours a day and under constant

infrared imaging surveillance. During that time he has been allowed three phone calls and three visits. He has no access to the Internet or newspapers.

The immediate question is whether Assange will be held under punitive conditions for another 48 hours. But the more fundamental issue may be his personal safety while being held by a judicial system that has so little regard for its own publicly expressed standards of justice.



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