Imperialist diplomacy exposed: Behind the witch-hunt of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks

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The following report was delivered by James Cogan, Socialist Equality Party (Australia) national organiser, to SEP public meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on December 20 and 21. The main report to the meetings, given by SEP national secretary Nick Beams, will be published on December 23. Click here *for a report on the meetings.*

The campaign being waged against WikiLeaks and its editor Julian Assange demonstrates the total repudiation, within American ruling circles and the ruling class internationally, of the most basic conceptions of democratic rights, civil liberties and freedom of the press.

Three weeks ago, WikiLeaks began publishing the first of some 250,000 US diplomatic cables that had been leaked to the organisation by one of the two million people who had access to them. A 23-year-old soldier, Bradley Manning, has been accused of being the source of the leaks.

What has followed is unprecedented. WikiLeaks and Julian Assange were immediately labelled as criminals by the US State department. Leading figures within the American political establishment went further, insisting Assange was a terrorist. Former Republican presidential nominee Mike Huckabee called for him to be executed. A former advisor to the Canadian prime minister demanded Assange's assassination, and suggested President Obama might want to use a Predator drone to carry it out.

Amazon shut down WikiLeaks' servers. EveryDNS shut down its web address, wikileaks.org. PayPal, MasterCard and Visa have all blocked financial transactions for WikiLeaks, which relies solely on donations to maintain its operations.

Assange himself was placed by Swedish prosecutors on an Interpol red alert over highly dubious charges of sexual misconduct. The first prosecutor decided there was no case to answer and refused to bring charges. They were only revived after another prosecutor was approached by a right-wing Swedish politician, in the context of the growing political outcry against WikiLeaks in the US, and used to imprison Assange in Britain.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* has reported the range of suspicions surrounding the woman who initiated the charges against Assange in Sweden, Anna Ardin. Australian journalist and expert on espionage, Philip Knightley, identifies her as someone whom the CIA would "consider an asset" due to her links with the rabidly anti-communist Swedish political establishment.

Bail conditions that would normally be associated with a murderer or mafia boss have been placed on Assange and there is considerable speculation that American authorities are drawing up an extradition warrant to bring him to the US and prosecute him for the crime of espionage. There are legitimate fears that Bradley Manning, who is being held in solidarity confinement in a maximum security prison, is effectively being tortured into making a false allegation that Assange pressured him or paid him to leak the material to WikiLeaks.

On the weekend, US vice president Joe Biden said Assange was "closer to a high-tech terrorist" than a representative of the media.

Fundamental issues of democratic rights, and the very survival of the internet as a medium for the free and frank exchange of information, are at stake. From this standpoint alone, the working class has immense interests in the defence of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange. If the US capitalist state is able to destroy the website and imprison or kill its founder for leaking evidence of civilian killings in Iraq, massive atrocities in both Iraq and Afghanistan and cables that shed light on the day-to-day reality of imperialist diplomacy—then the rights of all of us will have suffered a serious set-back.

A great deal has been said and written to try and discredit both WikiLeaks and Assange, so I think it is important to stress, unambiguously, that WikiLeaks is unquestionably a media organisation. It was established in 2006 by a group of talented, self-sacrificing and courageous people, led by Assange, who saw that the Internet could be used as a powerful medium for what are called "whistle-blowers" to disseminate information to the world exposing government and corporate crimes and abuses.

Leaks by whistle-blowers are the bread and butter of investigative journalism—the means by which the secrets of the powers-that-be come into the light of day and are subjected to public scrutiny. In times past, any editor or journalist deserving the title would protect, to the point of imprisonment, the legitimacy of publishing leaks and the confidentiality of those who leaked the information.

WikiLeaks rapidly came into public prominence. In 2008, it was awarded the *Economist* magazine's New Media Award and in 2009, Amnesty International's UK Media Award.

The furious denunciations of the site only began in April this year when it published, under the title "Collateral Murder", a video showing a US helicopter massacring a group of civilians in Iraq, including two journalists employed by Reuters.

In June, it published close to 77,000 documents on the war in

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Afghanistan, which exposed large scale civilian casualties and the utter corruption of the US-installed government of President Hamid Karzai. In October, WikiLeaks published over 400,000 US military reports from Iraq, including evidence of 15,000 previously unknown civilian casualties; and the knowledge of the US military that the security forces of the puppet Iraqi government were torturing and murdering alleged insurgents on a mass scale.

It is the exposure of US diplomacy however that has triggered the most vitriolic attacks on WikiLeaks.

In various quarters, attempts have been made to downplay or even ridicule the release of cables sent to Washington by US embassies and consulates around the world. The revelations in the cables have been dismissed as "nothing new" or even "gossip".

The comedian Jon Stewart is among the most prominent of this layer. Millions of young people in the US and internationally tune into his program "The Daily Show", in the hope of gaining critical commentary on American politics and world events in general.

In response to the exposures made by WikiLeaks, however, Stewart showed only indifference and hostility.

He told his audience: "Transparency is a good thing, government wrongdoing should be ferreted out. Although, just because something is secret doesn't necessarily mean it's nefarious." He dismissed the cables as "an interesting yet less explosive and less than searing indictment."

Stewart went on to give an imaginary lecture to Julian Assange: "I think you are underestimating how cynical Americans are about our government already. We've engineered coups in Chile, Iran, Guatemala etc. … We sell weapons to our enemy's enemy who somehow always then becomes our enemy and forces us to defend ourselves from our own weapons. That happens a lot. … It takes a lot to unimpress us. You should really read up about the stuff we already know about us. So unless in these WikiLeaks we're going to find out that the aliens from Area 51 killed Kennedy? Stop with the drama."

Stewart's demand that WikiLeaks cease publishing is obviously not an individual phenomenon. Those calling for Assange to be killed also want its publications to cease. The *Australian*'s Paul Kelly stated yesterday that his sources in the US, and he has many, were telling him that throughout the American establishment—government, media, corporate and so on—an almost unanimous "hardline" existed towards WikiLeaks.

Why? What is it about the diplomatic cables that are being made available for the world to see that is causing so much anger and anxiety in American ruling circles, and amongst self-styled liberals and anti-establishment figures like Jon Stewart?

To deal with the Stewart types first: these are people who do not oppose American imperialism. They developed a mass following by opposing some of its more obvious excesses, such as the war in Iraq and associated anti-democratic abuses committed in the name of the war on terrorism by the administration of George Bush.

For years, they portrayed the war and its atrocities as the product of deranged individuals within the Bush administration, such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. They actively promoted the conception that the election of a young black Democrat, Barack Obama, would result in far-reaching changes in American foreign and domestic policy

What has WikiLeaks exposed? It has revealed that regardless of which capitalist party sits in the White House and the Congress, American foreign policy does not alter. The United States is a bankrupt and declining power, riven by immense social inequality and class tensions, and confronting a range of rivals on the world arena.

The cables that have been published so far, reveal the weakness, the desperation, the ruthlessness and above all the lies, criminality and war-mongering that pervade every action of the representatives of American capitalism—among which I include the American media. WikiLeaks has enabled the world to see how behind-closed-doors, US diplomats and their allies are engaged in continuous conspiracies against other governments and are actively plotting new wars.

To give just a few examples:

In the earliest days of the Obama administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd discussed the prospect of using "force" against China, if it failed to bow down to arrangements in the Asia-Pacific that upheld US dominance. An earlier 2006 cable revealed that former Labor leader Kim Beazley told US officials that Australia would have "no alternative" but to join a US war with China over Taiwan

Other cables have revealed plans to deploy over 100,000 US and NATO troops into the Baltic states to confront Russia, if it sought to prevent their further incorporation into the NATO alliance.

These two proposals for a confrontation between nuclear-armed states underscore the immense dangers that confront humanity.

We know from WikiLeaks that Clinton instructed US embassies and United Nations representatives to gather information, such as credit card numbers and even DNA samples, on foreign leaders, including UN general secretary Ban Ki-Moon. The sole purpose of such an information-gathering exercise would be to use it to blackmail these people into aligning with US demands.

We know that war on Iran has been regularly discussed with various Middle Eastern regimes. We know that the US embassy in Georgia knew of the plans of the Georgian government to attack separatists who were directly backed by Russia, and risk provoking an armed confrontation with Moscow.

Here in Australia, we know a great deal more about the circumstances leading up to the June 23-24 coup that removed Kevin Rudd as prime minister and installed Julia Gillard. We know that leading ALP and trade union figures are what can only be described as US operatives, continuously briefing and being briefed by US embassy and intelligence officials. Rudd had alienated Washington with various attempts to establish a more independent foreign policy from the US, culminating in the June 23 announcement that Australian troops would leave Afghanistan within 2 to 4 years.

Within a day, Gillard, who had been named by the US embassy as Rudd's successor as early as 2008, was installed. She proceeded to immediately align her government completely with Washington, pledging to leave Australian troops in Afghanistan for another decade.

Cables have revealed secret US bombing in Yemen; plotting with the Pakistani military over a possible coup to overthrow the civilian

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government, and various conspiracies against Latin American governments. In 2006, the US embassy in Thailand discussed with the Thai military its plans to overthrow the elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin.

A leak reported today exposes what could be called the “Blood for Milk” cable. It reveals that the former New Zealand Labour government of Helen Clark reversed a decision not to send troops to Iraq after a warning was made that a NZ milk exporter, Fonterra, could lose a contract under the UN “oil for food” program as a result.

This is just one of the revelations that demonstrate the extent to which government decisions are made on the basis of utterly mercenary calculations regarding the needs of the financial and corporate elite.

Another cable reveals that the US embassy in Azerbaijan knew of a 2008 explosion on a BP gas rig in the Caspian Sea. No action was taken to verify the safety standards of BP facilities in the US or anywhere else. The result was the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, which led to 11 deaths and five million tonnes of oil contaminating the Gulf region.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in a recent perspective: “Those now baying for Assange’s blood, calling his actions ‘criminal,’ are responsible for real crimes whose victims number in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions.”

The fury against WikiLeaks reflects the desperate sense, within the ruling elites and their political representatives, that they need to impose a stranglehold on the flow of information. They know that the crisis of their economic system and their attempts to impose its full weight on the backs of the working class are creating the conditions for an eruption of class struggles. Depriving such a movement of free information and political perspective is regarded as vital.

We must expect, and prepare for, further attacks on the flow of information, particularly targeting the internet.

The working class must come to the defence of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange. Contrary to the claims of the Jon Stewarts of the world, that they have accomplished nothing of any significance, they have, in reality, done a great service. They have enabled anyone who cares to look, to educate themselves about the reality of imperialist diplomacy and the shameless lies that are told every day to justify the oppression of billions of people.

For those prepared to undertake the struggle, the WikiLeaks’ revelations can be the starting point for a significant development of political consciousness and an orientation toward not just exposing imperialist crimes, but constructing the revolutionary political movement of the international working class that is necessary to overthrow imperialism and the capitalist social order it upholds.

I urge all of you here tonight to commit yourselves to that struggle by applying to join the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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