The New York Times backs the attack on WikiLeaks

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With a brief Christmas Day editorial, “Banks and WikiLeaks,” the *New York Times* editorial page finally broke its silence on the official campaign targeting WikiLeaks, the news site that has published leaked US diplomatic cables. The *Times* did so, however, only to give its backhanded support for the campaign, led by the Obama administration, against WikiLeaks.

The *Times* has maintained a complete silence in the face of the threats of prosecution against the web site, which have escalated in the wake of the leak of hundreds of thousands of State Department documents. It has said nothing about the calls for Julian Assange—the organization’s founder—to be arrested, declared an enemy combatant and even assassinated.

Its first editorial on the persecution of WikiLeaks came at the bottom of the editorial page on Saturday. This obscure position itself highlights the newspaper’s tacit support for the campaign against WikiLeaks.

Acknowledging that WikiLeaks “has not been convicted of a crime,” the *Times* writes that “the financial industry is trying to shut it down.” It cites the decision by Visa, MasterCard, PayPal and Bank of America to refuse to process transactions and donations involving WikiLeaks.

The editorial makes clear, however, that the *Times* has no principled objections to this attack on democratic rights and freedom of the press—which essentially amounts to a threat by US banks to strangle any news organization that falls afoul of Washington. Indeed, the *New York Times* apparently believes the banks should have such powers.

It writes: “The Federal Reserve, the banking regulator, allows this. Like other companies, banks can choose whom they do business with. Refusing to open an account for some undesirable entity is seen as reasonable risk management. The government even requires banks to keep an eye out for some shady businesses—like drug dealing and money laundering—and refuse to do business with those who engage in them.”

This comparison is profoundly inappropriate and misleading. WikiLeaks is not a drug cartel or a mob outfit, but a news organization engaged in legal, constitutionally protected journalism.

As significant as what is said about WikiLeaks is what is not said. The organization has revealed details of contemporary politics of great public interest, warning of the dangers posed to the world by imperialist diplomacy. Prior to their revelation by WikiLeaks, these facts had been hidden by mainstream news outlets. They include the US planning of wars against major powers such as China, Russia and Iran, and various secret deals between US officials, leading European politicians and Arab monarchs.

As it cynically lumps WikiLeaks together with “shady businesses,” the *Times* is silent on the persecution of WikiLeaks by US and allied governments. Its founder, Julian Assange, faces trumped-up charges of sexual misconduct in Sweden.

The Obama administration—which has held alleged leaker Bradley Manning in solitary confinement for seven months without trial—is reportedly preparing espionage charges against Assange. If he is extradited to the US, a show trial there could lead to his receiving a life sentence. US Vice President Joe Biden has denounced Assange as a “high-tech terrorist.”

To stress that it does not defend Assange, the *Times* adds: “Our concern is not specifically about payments to WikiLeaks.”

One is entitled to ask: if the *Times* does not object to banks’ attacks on press freedoms and if it does not defend WikiLeaks, why has it written an editorial titled

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"Banks and WikiLeaks?"

A possible reason is to appear to raise objections to the treatment of Assange, in line with the sentiments of the many *Times* readers who support WikiLeaks.

It appears, however, that the *Times*' main concern relates to its own operations. It ends its editorial with the remarkable admission that it fears the banks could strangle newspapers, such as the *Times* itself, which publish WikiLeaks documents. It remarks that WikiLeaks, which reportedly has access to the hard drive of a Bank of America executive, will soon release data on corruption in the financial industry.

The *Times* writes: "What would happen if a clutch of big banks decided that a particularly irksome blogger or other organization was 'too risky'? What if they decided—one by one—to shut down financial access to a newspaper that was about to reveal irksome truths about their operations? This decision should not be left solely up to business-as-usual among the banks."

The conclusion of the editorial—which amounts to a plea for press censorship, as long as it is properly organized—is a devastating exposure of the *Times*' cowardice and duplicity.

The *Times* is well aware that a US espionage suit against WikiLeaks—based on claims that allowing sources to hand over information that embarrasses the state constitutes espionage—would be a drastic assault on the freedom of the press. By such standards, the operations of any news organization that is not a state propaganda outlet are illegal. The *Times* fears this might now lead to moves by Wall Street to directly censor major US news outlets.

The *Times*' unwillingness to mount any substantial defense of WikiLeaks under such conditions highlights the utter bankruptcy of American liberalism, and in particular of the *New York Times*, its leading press organ. Publications in Europe and Australia have raised concerns about prosecuting WikiLeaks or Assange. Even the *Washington Post* published an editorial expressing concern over the impact a prosecution of WikiLeaks would have for press freedom and free speech.

The *Times* in fact plays a critical role in the government-media propaganda nexus. Most infamously through the peddling of lies about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction by its journalist, Judith Miller, the *Times* has helped justify the wars and the criminal US policies that the WikiLeaks cables are exposing.

This is in line with previous statements by the *Times*' editor, Bill Keller, supporting press censorship. Claiming that the paper had a "stake in the war against terror," Keller wrote, "We agree *wholeheartedly* that transparency is not an absolute good. Freedom of the press includes freedom *not* to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise *with some regularity*" [emphasis added].

Nonetheless, the clear implication of the *Times*' concern over the banks' censorship is that an uncontrolled financial aristocracy, with a death grip over the financial system and the state, constitutes a clear and present danger to basic democratic rights.

The *Times*' specious argument about banks helping monitor "shady businesses" notwithstanding, the shadiest business in America is high finance. Its predatory lending in subprime mortgages precipitated a massive economic collapse in 2008, and it has responded by taking trillions in public bailout funds while insisting on social and wage cuts against working people.

The record of the financial aristocracy and the threat it poses to democratic rights means that the conversion of the banks into publicly-owned utilities, run in the interests of the working class—that is, the struggle for socialism—is a pressing political task. However, any talk of socialist measures to break the hold of the super-rich over the financial system is forbidden in the so-called "mainstream" US press.

Refusing to make even the slightest proposal aimed at curbing the power of the financial elite, the *New York Times* arrives at its craven capitulation to Wall Street.

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