

Free Julian Assange! Hands off WikiLeaks!

Bill Van Auken
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Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, was jailed in Britain Tuesday on charges that are nothing more than a pretext for an act of political repression dictated by the US government.

The aim of this judicial travesty is, in the first instance, to punish Assange for having made public secret cables exposing crimes and conspiracies carried out by US officials.

Second, by throwing Assange into London's Wandsworth prison, the US and British authorities hope not only to silence WikiLeaks but also to intimidate anyone else from daring to lift the lid on government secrets and lies.

It is almost certain that the ultimate goal of the shoddy legal frame-up is to have Assange extradited to the United States to be tried as a spy or even as an accomplice of terrorism.

Given the unprecedented and shameful public outcry by leading American politicians and media figures for Assange to be declared an "enemy combatant" or "terrorist" and "taken out" or "assassinated," not only would his ability to get a fair trial in the US be excluded, but his very survival would be in doubt.

Those leading the campaign against Assange and WikiLeaks are representatives of a government and a ruling establishment that is responsible for decades of criminality carried out behind the backs of the American people—from stolen elections, to illegal wars of aggression, to torture and other acts of international terror.

This is a country that was dragged into a war in Iraq that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives based upon outright lies—reported as fact by an obedient and complicit media—about "weapons of mass destruction" and nonexistent terrorist ties.

This and other crimes have been either concealed or justified by means of propaganda, the invocation of state secrets or outright lying to the public. This is what

makes those attacking WikiLeaks hate and fear its work, and what makes this work so vitally necessary.

Last April, the WikiLeaks site made public the "Collateral Murder" videotape, documenting a 2007 massacre in Baghdad carried out by an attack helicopter in which 15 Iraqis, including two Reuters journalists, were killed. Private First Class Bradley Manning was arrested soon after, charged with leaking the video and other documents. He is presently being held in a prison cell in Quantico, Virginia.

This was followed by the release of some 391,000 Afghanistan battlefield reports last July, documenting killings of civilians that had been covered up by the Pentagon, including the mowing down of unarmed demonstrators and assassinations by Special Forces death squads. Then in October, WikiLeaks made available 400,000 battlefield reports from Iraq, documenting more carnage against civilians and the complicity of the US military in horrific forms of torture against Iraqi detainees.

These documents laid bare to the public information that the government had systematically suppressed, with the assistance of a self-censoring media for which being "embedded" has become a permanent state of affairs. They provide ample evidence of war crimes carried out by both the Bush and Obama administrations.

The diplomatic cables that WikiLeaks began releasing last month—with less than 1,000 out of 250,000 thus far published—have already uncovered similar evidence of crimes and conspiracies, from the confirmation of a US missile strike that killed over 50 Yemeni civilians last December, to pressure campaigns to halt prosecutions of US officials for illegal kidnappings and torture, to instructions to US diplomats to gather personal intelligence—including DNA samples—on United Nations and foreign government officials.

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.

Not only the Republican right, but "liberal" Democrats have joined in this campaign. Among them is California's Democratic senator, Dianne Feinstein, who called in a column published by the *Wall Street Journal* Tuesday for the prosecution of Assange under the Espionage Act of 1917.

Feinstein charges Assange—a citizen of Australia—with being indifferent to "national security" and "our vital national interests," interests that she, as a US senator, a multimillionaire and the wife of a wealthy Pentagon contractor, holds especially dear.

"Mr. Assange claims to be a journalist and would no doubt rely on the First Amendment to defend his actions," she writes. "But he is no journalist: He is an agitator intent on damaging our government, whose policies he happens to disagree with, regardless of who gets hurt."

Dismissing claims that WikiLeaks is covered by the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech, Feinstein continues, "Just as the First Amendment is not a license to yell 'Fire!' in a crowded theater, it is also not a license to jeopardize national security."

The Espionage Act invoked by Feinstein has a long and reactionary history, used to jail the legendary workers' leader Eugene V. Debs in 1918 along with thousands of members of the Industrial Workers of the World and other working class militants.

The senator articulates the same kind of police-state, lynch-mob spirit that animated that wave of repression. According to the Orwellian logic of the current vendetta, an "agitator" who exposes the crimes of a government engaged in armed aggression and torture is a criminal. And the right to free speech can be suspended by the mere invocation of "national security."

This will not end with Assange and WikiLeaks. A frontal assault on core democratic rights is being prepared by a ruling elite that lives in fear of the people, concealing its actions and aims because it knows that the policies of social reaction at home and war abroad enjoy no popular support.

The attack on WikiLeaks has been aided and abetted by the cowardly media and by corporations ranging

from Amazon to MasterCard, Visa and PayPal, all of which swung into line at the first sign of government intimidation, joining in the campaign to silence the Internet organization and cut off its funding.

Success in this act of state repression would set the stage for a more far-ranging drive to suppress freedom of the Internet as a whole, shut down other web sites that oppose the policies of the US government, and impose an even tighter veil of secrecy over the operations of the CIA, the Pentagon and the White House.

The financial aristocracy and its political representatives feel an urgent 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, both at home and abroad, are creating the conditions for an eruption of class struggles. Depriving such a movement of free information and political perspective is seen as vital by the ruling elite.

This is what makes the launching of an international campaign in defense of WikiLeaks a life-and-death question for working people in every country. Mass protests and movements of solidarity must be organized to demand the immediate release of Julian Assange and Pfc. Bradley Manning and an end to the campaign of intimidation and repression against WikiLeaks.

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