Oppose the extradition of Julian Assange

Robert Stevens
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The decision last week by the High Court in London to dismiss the appeal of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange of his extradition to Sweden is an attack on democratic rights.

The judgement by Sir John Thomas and Mr. Justice Ouseley upheld the February 2011 decision by District Judge Howard Riddle at Belmarsh Magistrates Court for extradition, rejecting every issue of substance in Assange's appeal.

Relying on antidemocratic and arbitrary European Arrest Warrant (EAW) legislation, the judges pronounced, "The Prosecutor must be entitled to seek to apply the provisions of Swedish law to the procedure once it has been determined that Mr. Assange is an accused and is required for the purposes of prosecution."

Assange has still not been charged with any crime in Sweden, or in any other country. Yet, pending an appeal of the ruling that is unlikely to succeed, he will be forcibly removed to Sweden on the basis of unsubstantiated and contested accusations by two women of sexual assault and rape.

The judges' ruling amounted to a decision that if Sweden wants to have Assange extradited under an EAW, then that is what will happen. This is despite the fact that the alleged offences are not extraditable in the UK and that Assange fully cooperated with the authorities when the allegations were first made.

The treatment of Assange by the British judicial system since his arrest last December stands in stark contrast to its handling of the Chilean fascist dictator and mass murderer General Augusto Pinochet, whose extradition to Spain under an international arrest warrant issued by Judge Baltasar Garzón was rejected. Held from October 1998, Pinochet spent more than a year in the UK, living in luxury, before being allowed to return to Chile on the grounds of ill health. Pinochet's defence team included Clare Montgomery, the lawyer for the Crown Prosecution Service who has represented the Swedish authorities in arguing for Assange's extradition.

Whatever the personal motivations of Assange's accusers—both of whom admit that their sexual relations with Assange were consensual—their allegations were initially dismissed before being resurrected at the behest of a right-wing Swedish social-democratic politician.

Assange's real "crime" is that, through its publication of a mass of secret US military documents, diplomatic cables and video footage, WikiLeaks has exposed the criminal character of the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and numerous other conspiracies carried out against the world's people by Washington and its allies.

The High Court ruling is only the latest episode in an internationally coordinated campaign headed by the Obama administration and US intelligence agencies to discredit and destroy WikiLeaks.

Assange faces the gravest threat to his liberty and life. Under Swedish law, he can be held in solitary confinement for months before a trial is even held. He can also be extradited to the US, where he could face charges that carry the death penalty**.** US Vice President Joseph Biden has described Assange as a "high tech terrorist," a charge repeated by others, raising the possibility that he could be thrown into a military prison on the orders of President Obama and held indefinitely as a "terrorist" without any legal recourse.

One need only note the treatment of Bradley Manning, the American soldier accused of passing information to WikiLeaks, to get an idea of Assange's possible fate. Arrested in May 2010, he faces multiple charges including "aiding the enemy"—a capital offence. He has been held since then for the most part in solitary confinement, under conditions that, according to visitors, have reduced him to a semi-

catatonic state.

The legal frame-up of Assange was reinforced by a campaign of disinformation and vitriol against him by the media. A central role has been played by the nominally liberal press, with the aim of justifying his silencing and poisoning popular opinion.

The *New York Times* was one of the original media partners of WikiLeaks and was allowed to publish the documents it had obtained. It acknowledged meeting with White House officials to discuss the most effective means of limiting the negative impact of the WikiLeaks revelations and published a series of scurrilous articles and commentaries denouncing Assange and attempting to discredit him. Following last week's High Court ruling against Assange, its Sunday edition responded with the cynical headline, "Is this the WikiEnd?"

In Britain, the *Guardian* swiftly fell into line with the international campaign against Assange, to the point of editorialising in support of his extradition to Sweden. Following the High Court ruling, it published an opinion piece by Karin Olsson, the culture editor of the leading Swedish daily *Expressen*. Describing Assange as a "dodgy hacker from Australia," she called on him to "give up his futile struggle against extradition and show a little respect to the Swedish justice system."

In comments summing up the sharp shift to the right of the vast majority of those once considered liberals, she cited "left-wing commentator" Dan Josefsson as having recently admitted that Assange "was not the radical hero he had supposed, but 'a solitary and shabby libertarian who wants to tear down democratic societies.'"

Such ad hominen attacks on Assange's personality and motivations have become a commonplace, in the process relegating to an afterthought the pioneering and courageous journalism of WikiLeaks, which has exposed the high crimes of the major imperialist powers.

With few exceptions, the political organisations that claim to be of the left have done little or nothing to oppose the legal and political vendetta against Assange. In Britain, the Socialist Workers Party has written nothing on Assange since a five-sentence article in March, while the Socialist Party has not uttered a word for 11 months.

Back in December 2010, both organisations wrote with the aim of dismissing the significance of the WikiLeaks revelations. The SWP made a headline declaration December 7 that "Wikileaks Is Not a Threat," while the Socialist Party pontificated as its final word on the matter: "As bad as the revelations are, socialists already knew about many of the lengths US imperialism would go to…"

It goes without saying that the trade unions in Britain have done nothing in Assange's defence. The sole concern of the National Union of Journalists back in December 2010 was to praise WikiLeaks for its decision to rely upon "respected channels of journalism including *Der Spiegel*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde* and *El Pais*" to ensure "responsible reporting in the public interest."

The real role of these "responsible" and "respected" publications can be seen in their ongoing efforts to denigrate Assange.

Julian Assange must be vigorously defended and his deportation opposed. The destruction of Assange and WikiLeaks would be a victory for the forces of reaction everywhere and a serious blow to free speech, freedom of the press and the Internet, and basic democratic rights.

Experience testifies that this task cannot be entrusted to the supposed liberal circles of the more prosperous sections of the petty-bourgeoisie to which Assange himself is oriented.

Even the best elements from this milieu are incapable of opposing the rightward lurch of their peers and the political organisations to which they maintain an allegiance—be it Labour or the Liberal Democrats in Britain, the Democratic Party in the US or Sweden's Social Democrats.

The *World Socialist Web Site* insists that the defence of Assange and WikiLeaks can be carried out only on the basis of a socialist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist perspective. Everything depends on a determined effort to politically mobilise the broadest possible layers of workers and youth internationally.

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