

New evidence of US operation against Julian Assange

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While the Obama administration and its allies continue to deny the existence of a sealed US grand jury indictment against Julian Assange, further information has come to light about the extent of Washington's operation against the founder of the WikiLeaks web site.

Assange, who is fighting extradition to Sweden on dubious sexual assault allegations, is seeking political asylum in Ecuador and remains inside its embassy in London. He has good reason to fear that if he is extradited to Sweden, Washington will intervene, extraditing him to face a trial on espionage charges.

According to WikiLeaks, special task forces have been established by US intelligence agencies, and subpoenas have been issued compelling WikiLeaks associates to appear before a grand jury. The US Justice Department has served subpoenas on ISPs and online services for the Twitter accounts and other private data of WikiLeaks staff and supporters.

Further preparations emerged at recent pre-trial hearings of Army Private Bradley Manning, who is accused of disclosing classified military data—later published on WikiLeaks as Cablegate, the Afghan War Diaries, the Iraq War Logs and the Collateral Murder video footage. Manning has been incarcerated for more than 760 days without facing trial.

Recent prosecution testimony indicates that the case against Manning is only a small element in a massive FBI investigation. US Army Major Ashden Fein, the lead prosecution counsel, told hearings this month that the FBI file on the case, most of it classified, totalled 42,135 pages or 3,475 documents. “Manning is a piece

of the FBI file,” Fein said, and only accounted for “8,741 pages or 636 different documents.”

US Army Computer Crime Investigative Unit special agent Mark Mander also told the pre-trial hearings that the FBI was targeting seven civilians, including “the founders, owners or managers of WikiLeaks,” for criminal activity and espionage. He said a US military investigation into WikiLeaks began in early June 2010, a few days after Manning was arrested.

Significantly, Mander revealed that the investigation was receiving legal advice from Neil McBride, US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. McBride is in charge of the grand jury empanelled in Alexandria, Virginia, according to WikiLeaks Central editor and journalist Alexa O'Brien, who has been reporting on the Manning case.

WikiLeaks also reported that US officials have divulged that the Diplomatic Security Service, Department of State, the CIA, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive are involved in the investigation, as well as the Department of Justice, the FBI and the military.

This evidence further exposes the Australian government's repeated insistence that it has “no evidence” of US preparations to indict Assange, who is an Australian citizen. Equally bogus are its claims to be providing Assange with full consular assistance (see: “Christine Assange, mother of WikiLeaks' founder, speaks with the WSWS”).

In fact, the Labor government in Canberra has aided

and abetted Washington's vendetta from the outset. Prime Minister Julia Gillard set the tone when she asserted in December 2010, without any justification, that WikiLeaks's activities were "illegal." Assange decided to seek sanctuary in Ecuador because he had been "abandoned" by the Australian government. (See: "WikiLeaks founder Assange seeks asylum in Ecuadorian embassy in London")

Several thousand Americans have now signed an on-line petition calling on the Ecuadorian government to grant Assange political asylum. The signatories include Vietnam War whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, and filmmakers Michael Moore, Danny Glover and Oliver Stone, as well as lawyers, journalists, authors, academics and former US government officials.

A letter accompanying the petitions states that Assange faces the real danger of being extradited to the US. "His crime," the letter says, was exposing "crimes against humanity committed by the US government" and "important cases of US officials acting to undermine democracy and human rights around the world."

The widespread support, in the US and internationally, for the stand taken by Assange, is no doubt provoking concern within the American political establishment. There are indications that the Obama administration will seek to strong-arm the Ecuador government to stop it granting asylum to Assange. A June 21 editorial in the *Washington Post* pointed to the sort of discussion underway behind the scenes in the White House and US military and intelligence circles.

The newspaper denounced Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa as a "small-time South American autocrat" who had "wallowed" with Assange in "anti-American slanders and paranoia." It proposed that extreme economic pressure—via the termination of special trade preferences—be applied to convince Correa to reject Assange's application.

"A full third of Ecuadoran foreign sales (\$10 billion in 2011) go to the United States, supporting some 400,000 jobs in a country of 14 million people," the editorial stated. "Those preferences come up for

renewal by Congress early next year. If Mr. Correa seeks to appoint himself America's chief Latin American enemy and Julian Assange's protector between now and then it's not hard to imagine the outcome."

An obvious question arises. If Assange's conflict is purely with the Swedish government, then why is his asylum application of such concern in Washington? In its own way, the editorial confirms that behind the mask of the Swedish allegations, Assange faces the real prospect of being shipped off to the US, where he could spend the rest of his life behind bars.

If this US-led operation were to succeed it would strike a deep blow against the most basic democratic rights, including to document and lay bare the criminal actions and machinations of Washington and its allies. Workers and youth internationally must mobilise to defend Assange and Manning, guided by the understanding that this requires a direct political struggle against the governments involved, and the capitalist profit system itself, which is the root source of the mounting assault on fundamental democratic rights.



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