

Whistleblower Chelsea Manning to be released from prison today

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Army private Chelsea Manning, the military intelligence analyst who made public evidence of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, is scheduled to be released from military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, today after completing more than 7 years of her 35-year prison sentence.

Chelsea Manning was arrested by the Army in 2010 after providing WikiLeaks with hundreds of thousands of internal Army “incident logs” and about 250,000 diplomatic cables from American embassies around the world. In August 2013, she pleaded guilty to 20 of 22 charges against her and was sentenced to 35 years in prison, a sentence 10 times longer than any previous punishment imposed on a federal employee, military or civilian, for leaking classified information.

After receiving the sentence, Manning announced that she was transgendered and took the name Chelsea Manning (previously she had identified as a man and was known by the name of Bradley Manning). She later began hormone therapy and requested gender reassignment surgery, which the Army repeatedly denied.

The release of Chelsea Manning is a politically significant event. Manning is rightfully a hero in the eyes of millions of workers and young people around the world who recognize what extraordinary courage it took to inform the American public about the criminal actions being carried out by the US military.

The number of crimes exposed by the material provided by Manning is staggering. Included in the leaked material was the infamous video that went on to be published on the Internet by WikiLeaks under the title “Collateral Murder,” showing an American helicopter attack on civilians in Baghdad that killed 16 people, including two Reuters journalists.

Other documents including “after-action reports” describing US soldiers’ experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, proving that civilian deaths were far higher than officially acknowledged. The cables revealed damning evidence of official US lying, including dossiers on the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay proving that most of them had

no significant role in terrorist operations.

Despite the massive evidence provided, not a single person was jailed, arrested, or even charged for any of the documented crimes. Instead, the military brass together with the Obama administration ruthlessly persecuted Manning for what is a far greater “crime” in the eyes of the ruling class: exposing the murderous nature of the US war machine. The US political and military establishment, seething with anger, used Chelsea Manning to set an example for any other potential whistleblowers.

The retaliation was merciless. Immediately following the revelations, Manning was forcibly detained in an outdoor cage in an attempt to break her psychologically. From July 2010 to April 2011, she was held under atrocious conditions at Quantico Marine brig in Virginia, much of that time stripped naked as a “security” measure. All told, Chelsea Manning spent nearly a year and a half in solitary confinement, 23 hours a day, a form of detention classified as torture by human rights groups.

After sentencing, conditions would continue to worsen for Manning, leading to two separate attempts to take her own life, for which she was threatened with more severe treatment. Just last year, the Army considered sentencing Manning to indefinite solitary confinement for possessing unauthorized reading material and an expired tube of toothpaste.

President Obama commuted Manning’s sentence to just over seven years, in one of his final actions before leaving office January 20. This was no great humanitarian action, as some sought to characterize it at the time, but rather a calculation that the global image of US imperialism would suffer if, as appeared likely, Manning had been driven by her ordeal to carry out a third and successful suicide attempt.

It was Obama and Hillary Clinton, in particular, who spearheaded the persecution of Manning and other whistleblowers. The class hatred of the Democratic Party toward Manning is demonstrated by their silence as she reaches her final day in prison. Moreover, under conditions where the Democratic Party is lining up with the military-

intelligence apparatus to indict the Trump administration for handing over “secrets” to Russian envoys, the Democrats wish to distance themselves as much as possible from the example of Chelsea Manning, who offended the CIA and Pentagon by handing over evidence of their crimes to the American people.

Manning has kept in touch with her supporters and the outside world throughout her experience mainly through Twitter. Recently, she wrote of her pending release: “I want that indescribable feeling of connection with people and nature again, without razor wire or a visitation booth. I want to be able to hug my family and friends again. And swimming—I want to go swimming!”

It has recently been reported that Manning, who is now 29, will remain an active duty soldier in the U.S. Army after today’s release. She will be placed on voluntary excess leave rather than being discharged. While it is technically possible, it is highly unlikely that she will be called to actual military service. Under this status she will be unpaid, but will have access to health care and other benefits that will allow her to complete her gender reassignment surgery. It should be noted that these benefits are not guaranteed. If Manning’s appeal of her court-martial conviction is denied, she could be dishonorably discharged and lose her health benefits.

Manning has not publicly announced any plans for what she will do after today beyond her surgery. Her ACLU attorney, Chase Strangio, told NBC News, “She is waiting to experience life outside of prison before declaring any future plans. ... After so many years of government control over her body and gender, I know she is eager to grow her hair, express her gender and negotiate decisions on her own terms.”

While Manning’s release from prison will grant her physical freedom, she will still be restricted in many ways. One important aspect of the voluntary excess leave status is that it makes her vulnerable to new military retribution if she “steps out of line” in the eyes of the military establishment. Manning’s military defense counsel, David Coombs, told NBC News that “Chelsea is still subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). ... She wouldn’t be charged again for the same offenses, but if she committed a new crime, the military would still have jurisdiction over her.”

An offense warranting military action includes things such as a fistfight, speaking or writing critically of the political or military establishment, or revealing previously unreleased classified information. “You would want to be careful in terms of what you want to write or say if you’re still under military control,” Coombs warned. “Let’s say you write something critical, now you run the real chance of being

called on the carpet for that.”

Nonetheless, Manning has voiced some critical political views through Twitter since her commutation. In a guest column in Britain’s *Guardian*, Manning wrote that “after eight years of attempted compromise and relentless disrespect in return, we are moving into darker times.” Additionally, Manning has said former president Barack Obama left a “vulnerable legacy,” noting that he had achieved “very few permanent accomplishments.”

The persecution of more whistleblowers than all other administrations combined, including Chelsea Manning, will forever be a hallmark of the Obama administration. This policy was embraced by all prominent members of the Democratic party, including then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who in December 2011, while Manning was being tortured and persecuted, defended the campaign against her on the grounds that “some information which is sensitive, which does affect the security of individuals and relationships, deserves to be protected and we will continue to take necessary steps to do so.”

For its part, the Trump administration, determined to outdo the reactionary policies of the Obama administration in every way, has recently escalated the witch-hunt and persecution of other prominent whistleblowers—Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, and Edward Snowden, the NSA whistleblower now in forced exile in Russia.

Snowden, in a recent comment, expressed his solidarity with Manning’s ongoing struggle, saying, “I’m grateful that Chelsea will finally have a chance to enjoy the freedoms she gave so much to defend. Courage to her—and volume to her voice.”

The increasingly vicious crackdown on whistleblowers reveals most openly the immense fear within the ruling establishment of growing opposition within the working class. The true face of US imperialism has again and again been exposed with the help of brave individuals like Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and Edward Snowden. The defense of these individuals, and an end to the crimes that they have risked their lives to expose, can only come from the mobilization of the international working class.



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