Prominent whistleblowers and journalists defend Julian Assange at online vigil

Oscar Grenfell
12 July 2018

Over the weekend, dozens of public figures, including prominent whistleblowers and journalists, took part in a 36-hour international online vigil in defence of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange.

The event was the third "Unity4J" vigil organised by independent journalist and New Zealand Internet Party leader, Suzie Dawson, since Assange's communications were cut-off by Ecuadorian authorities at their London embassy last March.

The vigil reflected the widespread public support for Assange, and opposition to the attempts to force him into British and US custody, where he faces possible espionage charges for exposing the war crimes and diplomatic intrigues of the major powers.

The speakers included individuals who have been persecuted by governments for taking a courageous stand against war and authoritarianism.

Daniel Ellsberg, whose release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 exposed the extent of US criminality in Vietnam, drew a parallel between his own activities and those of WikiLeaks. Referring to WikiLeaks' 2010 publication of US war logs in Iraq and Afghanistan, he stated: "I really waited almost 40 years, after the Pentagon Papers had come out, for someone to do what I had done."

Ellsberg pointed to similarities between the attacks that had been levelled against him, and the persecution of Assange. "I was charged with 12 felony counts, a possible 150 years in prison. Nixon had in mind for me what Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have had in mind for Julian Assange," he said.

Ellsberg declared that WikiLeaks' publications had exposed "our imperial operations worldwide" and had contributed to popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

He warned that it was "almost certain" that Assange would be extradited to the US to face espionage charges, if he was taken into British custody. Ellsberg stated that an espionage prosecution of Assange, a journalist, would have far-reaching constitutional implications.

"If that were successful, it would mean a real change in our constitution and in our regime. It would be a regime change," Ellsberg said. "We have come very far from democratic institutions in recent years, as Ed Snowden revealed, but the pursuit of Assange would be one step further and would essentially chill all leaking and whistleblowing."

Ellsberg stated that in persecuting Assange, the Trump administration has been emboldened by the corporate press, because the WikiLeaks editor could "not count on other journalists protesting, as much as they should, which is shameful of them."

Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, said that within the US intelligence apparatus, there was a "maniacal hatred of Julian and WikiLeaks. In their eyes they have to get him and they have to make an example of him so there won't be any more Julian Assanges."

Hedges placed the attacks on WikiLeaks in the context of the broader drive to end online freedom of speech. He referenced Google's introduction of censorship algorithms last year, which he said were aimed at reducing traffic to the *World Socialist Web Site*, *Truthdig* and other "anti-capitalist" and "anti-imperialist" web sites.

Hedges stated that governments were using "the classic method, which is to tar WikiLeaks, or dissenters like myself, as being agents of a foreign power." He explained: "We have the whole Russia hysteria here, which is a smokescreen and fictitious, but which the corporate media can't spend enough time

© World Socialist Web Site

hyperventilating about. Because the elites do not want to acknowledge that it's social inequality which they engineered which has created this loss of faith in the ruling ideology of global capitalism."

Suzie Dawson read, in full, Hedges' statement to the WSWS last month endorsing a Socialist Equality Party rally in defence of Assange, held in Sydney, Australia, which she said was "very gratefully received in whistleblower circles." Hedges reiterated the call for pressure to be placed on the Australian government to force it to take immediate action to secure Assange's freedom and safe passage to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

WikiLeaks associate and independent journalist Craig Murray also spoke. He recalled his own experiences in the UK diplomatic corps, where he publicly exposed British government collusion with torture conducted by the Uzbekistan government.

"I realised it is absolutely essential that citizens have access to information about what is being done in their name," Murray said. "WikiLeaks has been an essential tool in that. Our view of the world is so much more informed than it would be were it not for WikiLeaks."

Murray stated that WikiLeaks' exposure of government criminality had "transformed the view of millions and millions, possibly billions, of people around the world." He said that Assange would be "seen by historians as a central figure in the moment when the way we get our information changed" from state and corporate media propaganda, to "communally shared information."

Murray declared that Assange would "come to be seen in the future as an extremely important historic figure. Much more important than the small politicians who currently strut about on the world stage."

Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst who investigates the crimes of the intelligence agencies, noted that the Trump administration's persecution of Assange had escalated after WikiLeaks' publication of Vault 7, a trove of documents exposing CIA spying and hacking operations.

The documents showed that the CIA had developed the capacity to hack into computer systems, and leave "tell-tale" signs attributing the attack to other entities. McGovern stated that such revelations had been suppressed by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other corporate outlets, in collaboration with the US government.

McGovern said that it was shortly after the publication of Vault 7, "that the Ecuadorians were leaned all over to say, you have to make it really, really miserable for Julian Assange."

William Binney, a former US National Security Agency official who has helped to expose mass surveillance of the American population, said that governments "can't allow the truth out. So they have to suppress it, minimise it and try to get the masses of the public to disbelieve it."

Binney said that the shut-off of Assange's communications by the Ecuadorian government was "basically the kind of torture techniques" used by the US government "in the black sites, Gitmo, and prisons in Iraq." He stated: "It's a technique that psychologists developed with the CIA as to how to treat people to make them feel very isolated, and make them psychologically turn on themselves mentally."

Cian Westmoreland, a former US army employee who has campaigned against the US military's illegal drone killing program, said that viewing WikiLeaks' "Collateral Murder" video, showing the US murder of unarmed Iraqi civilians and journalists, had a "catalysing impact" on his decision to speak out on the war crimes of the American government.

Other prominent speakers included philosopher and author Slavoj Zizek and British politician George Galloway, who was expelled from the Labour Party for his opposition to the invasion of Iraq. A range of other independent journalists and commentators also spoke.

The event stood in stark contrast to the silence on Assange's plight by the corporate media around the world, and the support for the attacks against him by official parliamentary parties and pseudo-left organisations everywhere. It underscored the critical importance of building a mass political movement of the working class in defence of Assange, and against the turn to imperialist war and authoritarianism that WikiLeaks has done so much to expose.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site