Imminent threat to Julian Assange underscores need for global defence movement

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Credible reports indicate that Ecuador's government is about to renege on the political asylum it granted to WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange and hand him over to British police, possibly within days.

The reports also indicate that Assange would be subjected to lengthy imprisonment by the British authorities, perhaps for two years or more, pending extradition to the US, where he could face the death penalty on espionage and conspiracy charges.

These developments underscore the necessity to deepen the fight for a powerful international working-class movement for his freedom and for the defence of all basic democratic rights.

Urgent protests are being organised in many countries to respond when Assange is evicted from Ecuador's London embassy. Click here for details. The WSWS endorses such demonstrations and urges its readers to participate. Such action, however, will be the beginning of a protracted campaign to defend Assange and oppose the increasing attack and censorship on critical voices and independent media on the Internet.

This week's visit to London by Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno, ostensibly to deliver a speech at the 2018 Global Disability Summit, is likely to rubberstamp a conspiracy involving the Ecuadorian, British, US and Australian governments to incarcerate Assange, an Australian citizen.

The WikiLeaks editor has already spent more than six years effectively trapped in Ecuador's embassy, and been cut off all communications with the outside world since March 28.

Assange has not been charged with a single crime. He is being incarcerated because the ruling elites fear the impact of his media organisation's ongoing, and invaluable, efforts to expose the mass surveillance, anti-democratic machinations and war crimes being conducted by governments and corporations, particularly the US and its allies.

The conspiracy to silence Assange and WikiLeaks has intensified in blatant defiance of rulings by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights calling for his protection. This repudiation of the international law of asylum underscores the anxiety in ruling circles about the work of WikiLeaks and other progressive web sites, particularly under conditions of an international upsurge in working-class struggles and deep popular hostility to the US-led drive to trade war and war.

In an *Intercept* article on July 21, journalist Glenn Greenwald reported: "A source close to the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry and the President's office, unauthorized to speak publicly, has confirmed to the Intercept that Moreno is close to finalizing, if he has not already finalized, an agreement to hand over Assange to the UK within the next several weeks. The withdrawal of asylum and physical ejection of Assange could come as early as this week."

Based on a discussion with one of Assange's lawyers, Jennifer Robinson, Greenwald explained the pseudo-legal concoction being prepared by the British and US authorities to lock Assange away for many years.

The only publicly announced criminal proceeding Assange faces is a 2012 arrest warrant for "failure to surrender." This minor bail violation charge arose when Assange obtained asylum from Ecuador after exhausting all his legal appeals against being extradited to Sweden to face a trumped-up "investigation" into sexual assault allegations and almost certain removal to the US.

The bail charge carries a maximum prison term of three months, and his lawyers would argue that his time already spent in a British jail should be counted against any such sentence. In 2010, on the basis of the European arrest warrant to answer "questions" in Sweden, Assange was imprisoned for 10 days, then placed under house arrest for 550 days.

Beyond the minor charge for breaching bail, however, British prosecutors are expected to claim that Assange's

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alleged “failure to surrender” amounted to “contempt of court,” which carries a prison term of up to two years. This more lengthy detention would not only extend the silencing of Assange. It would permit the US authorities ample time to bring extradition proceedings, which could take up to three years alone.

Even before removal to the US, Assange would thus end up having spent more than a decade in prison or effective detention despite never having been charged with, let alone convicted of, any crime.

Ecuador’s moves to terminate Assange’s political asylum are the result of intensive pressure on the Moreno government by the Trump administration, which has escalated the Obama White House’s machinations to get its hands on Assange. US Vice President Mike Pence visited Ecuador earlier this month to ramp up Washington’s demands on Moreno, who has shifted the country’s government sharply to the right to try to win favour from the US and the financial markets.

Leading figures in the Trump administration, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have publicly declared their intent to see Assange arrested and imprisoned. Sessions last year said putting Assange on trial was a US “priority” and Pompeo, who was then the CIA director, branded WikiLeaks a “non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia.

Pompeo explicitly rejected any defence of Assange under the First Amendment in the US Constitution guaranteeing free speech. WikiLeaks, he said, “pretended that America’s First Amendment freedoms shield them from justice … but they are wrong.”

The US threats against Assange escalated after March 2017, when WikiLeaks began publishing a massive leak of CIA documents. The “Vault 7” files reveal that the CIA is hacking into the phones, PCs, servers, smart televisions and vehicle computer systems of millions of people in the US and internationally.

The Trump administration’s determination to put Assange on trial exposes the fraud of the propaganda campaign, spearheaded by the US Democratic Party, to slander Assange as a tool of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Assange supposedly helped elect Trump by publishing revealing emails about Hillary Clinton’s presidential bid.

The Democratic National Committee has already shredded the First Amendment by suing Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing the emails. The emails showed that the committee, on Clinton’s behalf, sought to sabotage Bernie Sanders’ campaign for the 2016 presidential nomination and that Clinton gave secret speeches to Wall Street financiers assuring them that she would protect their interests, regardless of any false promises she made on the campaign trail.

Swedish authorities finally dropped their “investigation” into Assange in May 2017, thus cancelling the European Arrest Warrant against him. However, Prime Minister Theresa May’s government and the British courts still refused to cancel their own arrest warrant against him, nominally for absconding on bail.

The danger Assange faces was highlighted on July 20 by comments by UK Foreign Affairs Secretary Jeremy Hunt and Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who was in Britain for ministerial talks. Hunt boasted that Assange faces “serious charges” and will receive a “warm welcome” from the British police once he leaves the embassy.

Bishop, in effect, washed her government’s hands of Assange’s plight, saying it was a matter for “British law enforcement authorities.” Her contemptuous remark signalled a defiance of a globally broadcast rally conducted by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia, with the support of well-known investigative journalist John Pilger, in Sydney’s Town Hall Square on June 17. That rally demanded that the Australian government secure Assange’s right to return to Australia, if he so wishes, with guarantees that he not be extradited to the US.

As all these experiences demonstrate, Assange’s fate cannot be left up to capitalist governments and courts. We urge workers and young people everywhere to demand his immediate freedom, as a critical part of the fight to defend fundamental democratic rights. The vast social power of the international working class must be mobilised for his defence, independent of all the pro-imperialist parties, trade unions and media organisations that have lined up with the ruling class against him.

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