Politicians celebrate “World Press Freedom Day” as Julian Assange languishes in prison

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May 3 is World Press Freedom Day, sponsored annually by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

UNESCO holds the event, it avows, to celebrate “the fundamental principles of press freedom, to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.”

Those claims are hollow and duplicitous, as the facts demonstrate.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange remains locked up in a high-security prison in London and faces the threat of rendition to the US. Why? Because he and his organization took seriously “the fundamental principles of press freedom” and actively shed light on both the daily corruption and criminality of governments and corporations internationally and the murderous activities of the American military in particular. As one of Assange’s lawyers has observed, Washington is “seeking to extradite a foreign journalist to face criminal charges for publishing truthful information.”

Meanwhile, another UN body, its Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, registered its disapproval Friday of the “disproportionate sentence” of 50 weeks imprisonment meted out to Assange for violating bail, which it noted was “a minor violation.” In 2015, the Working Group, part of the UN Human Rights system, expressed its opinion that Assange was being “arbitrarily detained” by the governments of Sweden and the UK and that he was “entitled to his freedom of movement and to compensation.” That opinion was ignored by the British government, as Friday’s will be.

In any event, no one associated with UNESCO or World Press Freedom Day made mention of Assange during this week’s events. Indeed, remarkably, one of the keynote speakers at the main celebration in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia hosted by the African Union was the British foreign secretary, the Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt.

The “right honourable” Mr. Hunt was one of the British government officials responsible for the brutal seizure and incarceration of Assange on April 11. Following the WikiLeaks publisher’s arrest, Hunt said in a statement, “What we’ve shown today is that no one is above the law. Julian Assange is no hero. He has hidden from the truth for years and years and it is right that his future should be decided in the British judicial system.”

In his address in Addis Ababa, Hunt, according to a press release, “set out his vision to improve media freedom.” We might be forgiven for suggesting that the foreign secretary, in presiding over the vindictive persecution of the globe’s most prominent investigative journalist, had already “set out his vision,” not with prepared remarks but with the rude violence of the Metropolitan Police Service.

In the course of his speech, a tissue of outright falsehoods and empty platitudes, Hunt told his audience in Ethiopia that “the progress of humanity clearly shows that wisdom arises from the open competition between ideas when different viewpoints are given the oxygen to contend freely and fairly.” Hunt might have added, “As long as those different viewpoints sustain the official one. Otherwise, the supply of oxygen will be cut off.”

The presentations in Addis Ababa were dominated by the fears of all the participants, imperialist and African bourgeois politicians alike, of growing popular discontent and the perceived need to suppress oppositional voices.

This gave the speeches by Hunt and others—and the general approach at present of authorities all over the world to the question of “press freedom”—their contorted and dishonest “doublespeak” character. What governments actually want is freedom *from* press freedom. The ruling elites themselves want to be able to operate *freely*, that is, without the interference of dissenting and “disruptive” voices.

These concerns lie behind the systematic effort to censor and neuter the internet, justified by pious references to the dangers of hate speech, xenophobia, online harassment, concocted statistics, misleading media reports, the alleged manipulation of elections and “populist" rhetoric. Of course, misinformation, deceit and the fomenting of every form of

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backwardness and prejudice have been the bourgeois media's stock-in-trade everywhere since time immemorial, about which no one in a position of authority has ever thought to complain. It is precisely the *breakdown* of the hitherto effective mechanisms of misinformation and deceit that has the powers-that-be up in arms and fuels the ferocity of Assange's persecution.

Along these lines, UNESCO's "Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training" (2018) argues that "authoritative sources" and "credible journalism" have been damaged by what it terms, in an imperishable phrase, the current "information disorder."

The authors argue that social media are "undermining democracy" by "creating echo chambers, polarisation and hyper-partisanship," by "converting popularity into legitimacy," and by "allowing manipulation by populist leaders, governments and fringe actors."

The Handbook points anxiously to the phenomenon of "news publishers struggling to hold onto audiences as barriers to publication are removed, empowering any person or entity to produce content, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and compete for attention." And it furthermore warns that in "the high-speed information free-for-all on social media platforms and the internet, everyone can be a publisher. As a result, citizens struggle to discern what is true and what is false. Cynicism and distrust rule. Extreme views, conspiracy theories and populism flourish and once-accepted truths and institutions are questioned."

The vehemence of their conservative, antidemocratic and pro-establishment views and the depth of their desire to protect "once-accepted truths and institutions" help explain why the very respectable, well-spoken organizers of World Press Freedom Day hope that Assange and everyone like him rot in jail until the end of time.

If UNESCO and the rest of this crowd were serious about "disinformation" and "misinformation," in any case, they would present as Exhibit No. 1 the American media's mendacious and calamitous campaign over "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq, the greatest "fake news" operation of modern times by far, which has led to the death of more than one million people and the devastation of an entire region.

Leon Trotsky once observed that "Every historical epoch has not only its own technique and its own political form, but also a hypocrisy peculiar to itself."

How is it possible for Hunt, on the one hand, to announce that he and other officials are launching "a global campaign to protect journalists doing their job and promote the benefits of a free media," and, on the other, to do his utmost to muzzle and, if possible, silence Assange forever?

In fact, this goes beyond mere hypocrisy. English economist and social scientist John A. Hobson, in his valuable *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), argued that such official "compartmentalizing," this "genius of inconsistency, of holding conflicting ideas or feelings in the mind simultaneously," was "no case of hypocrisy, or of deliberate conscious simulation of false motives." He contended rather that this was "the condition which Plato terms 'the lie in the soul'—a lie which does not know itself to be a lie." This, Hobson maintained, was "the ethics and sociology" of the imperialist stage of development, with its "elaborate weaving of intellectual and moral defences."

"The controlling and directing agent of the whole process," he wrote, "is the pressure of financial and industrial motives, operated for the direct, short-range, material interests of small, able, and well-organised groups in a nation."

Assange is a class-war prisoner, being held on behalf of the wealthy and powerful, that "small, able, and well-organised group," because he exposed some of their crimes against the oppressed.

Jeremy Hunt was right about one thing in Addis Ababa. "If problems and tensions are bottled up then they are far more likely to boil over," he cautioned. "Stopping journalists from reporting a problem does not make it go away… The truth is that when governments start closing newspapers and suppressing the media, they are more likely to be storing up trouble for the future than preserving harmony."

He simply has no idea.

All over the world, workers are engaged in a growing strike movement in defense of their jobs, wages and social rights. It is this social force, not the corrupt representatives of the capitalist oligarchy, that form the real social basis for the defense of democratic rights.

On Saturday, the International Committee of the Fourth International will hold its sixth annual online May Day celebration. A central focus of the event will be the organization of the working class in defense of Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning. We urge all readers of the WSWS and all those seeking to defend freedom of expression to register and participate.

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