

Hundreds of journalists around the world sign open letter demanding freedom for Assange

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Hundreds of journalists and media workers from every corner of the globe have put their name to an impassioned open letter demanding the unconditional freedom of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and an immediate “end to the legal campaign being waged against him for the crime of revealing war crimes.”

The 422 signatories to date include WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger and Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers whistleblower who revealed the full criminality of the Vietnam War.

On behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the letter has been signed by WSWWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North and other leading WSWWS reporters.

The powerful appeal testifies to the rogue and lawless character of Britain’s imprisonment of Assange in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison. It makes clear that the attempt by the US administration of President Donald Trump to prosecute him on 17 Espionage Act charges and imprison him for life is viewed among principled journalists as a frontal assault on press freedom and a dire threat to their own rights.

The journalists’ stand follows the issuing of an open letter to the British Home Secretary last month by more than 65 eminent doctors, condemning the denial of adequate medical care to Assange and warning that he could die in prison. It coincides with a statement by a group of international lawyers documenting the illegality of the US-led persecution of Assange and calling for his immediate release.

These initiatives reveal that outside the rarefied circles of the governments, intelligence agencies and media corporations that have spearheaded the nine-year campaign against Assange, world public opinion is with the WikiLeaks founder and against his persecutors.

The journalists’ letter states: “This case stands at the heart of the principle of free speech. If the US government can prosecute Mr Assange for publishing classified documents,

it may clear the way for governments to prosecute journalists anywhere, an alarming precedent for freedom of the press worldwide.”

The letter bluntly declares: “In a democracy, journalists can reveal war crimes and cases of torture and abuse without having to go to jail. It is the very role of the press in a democracy.”

It reviews the repeated findings of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that Assange was effectively subjected to illegal detention by the British authorities when they besieged the Ecuadorian embassy, where he successfully sought political asylum in 2012.

The letter outlines the conclusion of UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, who has stated that Assange’s legal and democratic rights have been trampled on and that he has been subjected to an unprecedented campaign of “public mobbing” that has amounted to “psychological torture.”

The journalists write: “We hold the governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Ecuador and Sweden accountable for the human rights violations to which Mr Assange has been subjected.”

They cite a powerful comment from Melzer, who wrote earlier this year: “It finally dawned on me that I had been blinded by propaganda, and that Assange had been systematically slandered to divert attention from the crimes he exposed.” The UN official pointed to the role of the corporate press in demonising Assange and repeating the smears against him concocted by the intelligence agencies.

Significantly, the media workers state: “Assange has made an outstanding contribution to public interest journalism, transparency and government accountability around the world.” They review some of the dozens of awards he has received for WikiLeaks’ reportage. This is a powerful refutation of the claims of corporate hacks who have aligned themselves with the Trump administration by stating that Assange is “not a journalist.”

The letter also takes a stand for whistleblowers who are being persecuted for having exposed government criminality, declaring: “Mr Assange’s reporting of abuses and crimes is of historic importance, as have been the contributions by whistleblowers Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Reality Winner, who are now in exile or incarcerated.”

The journalists invoke the fight waged by French novelist Émile Zola on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish military officer who was framed on bogus espionage charges at the turn of the 19th century. In 1898, Zola wrote his famous “J’Accuse!” open letter, naming those responsible for the persecution of Dreyfus.

The journalists’ letter states: “Zola’s stance entered history books and still today stands for our duty to fight miscarriages of justice and to hold the powerful to account. This duty is as necessary as ever today, when Julian Assange is being victimised by governments and faces 17 charges under the US Espionage Act, legislation that also dates back over a hundred years.”

The comparison is entirely appropriate. As in the case of Dreyfus, the persecution of Assange is being spearheaded by the most reactionary forces in society, who are using it as a precedent to abrogate the fundamental rights of the entire population. And, as in the defence of Dreyfus, nothing less than the mobilisation of the working class and of principled supporters of civil liberties, including journalists, will secure Assange’s unconditional freedom and repulse the attacks on democratic rights.

The concluding section of the letter warrants being quoted in full. It states: “As journalists and journalists’ organisations that believe in human rights, freedom of information and of the public’s right to know, we demand the immediate release of Julian Assange.

“We urge our governments, all national and international agencies and fellow journalists to call for an end to the legal campaign being waged against him for the crime of revealing war crimes.

“We urge our fellow journalists to inform the public accurately about this abuse of fundamental rights.”

In a sign of the immense global respect for WikiLeaks, and recognition of the international implications of Assange’s persecution, the letter has been signed by journalists from countries as diverse as South Africa, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, Israel, Lebanon, Chile, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Russia, China, New Zealand, Australia, Iceland, Sweden, Italy, France, Turkey, Croatia, Britain, the United States and a host of others.

Among them are figures with decades of experience in the media industry. In Australia, this includes Kerry O’Brien, the chair of the Walkley Foundation, along with

investigative reporters Andrew Fowler and Quentin Dempster.

Current employees of major media organisations have also signed. In Germany, leading figures at many of the country’s most prominent news organisations are participating in the initiative. This includes Becker Sven, the editor of *Der Spiegel*, and Bastian Obermeyer, head of investigations at *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Prominent figures in progressive and anti-war media, including *Consortium News* editor Joe Lauria and journalists Chris Hedges, Mark Curtis, Elizabeth Vos, Nozomi Hayase and many others are signatories.

Also present is Anthony Bellanger, general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, a global association with 187 affiliated organisations in 140 countries, representing 600,000 members.

All defenders of Assange and of democratic rights should promote the stand taken by the journalists as widely as possible. The letter should be circulated on social media, sent to all media workers and distributed at university campuses and in working class areas.

The letter is another expression of the groundswell of public support for Assange, with the hostility to his persecution among millions of workers, students, young people and intellectuals around the world erupting to the surface of political life.

This welcome development underscores the need to intensify the campaign in his defence, above all by raising it as widely as possible in the international working class, the most powerful social force in the world whose interests are inseparable from an offensive to protect all democratic and social rights.

The full text of the letter can be read here, along with the current list of signatories.



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