Witnesses testify that CIA spied on Assange and his lawyers

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Further detailed evidence has been produced in a Spanish court that the CIA systematically and illegally recorded conversations between WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and his lawyers, and all other visitors, while he was trapped inside Ecuador's London embassy before he was dragged out and arrested last April to face extradition to the US.

The Spanish newspaper *El País* yesterday reported that three people who worked for the Spanish security company UC Global S.L. have testified as protected witnesses in Spain's High Court, the Audencia Nacional, that the company's head David Morales handed over the surveillance material to the CIA.

The testimony is another devastating exposure of the decade-long political conspiracy conducted against Assange by the American, British and Australian governments, and their collaborators in Sweden and Ecuador. US imperialism and its allies want to silence him for life for publishing hundreds of thousands of documents laying bare the war crimes and other criminal activities of the US and its allies around the world. They are equally desperate to prevent further damning leaks by courageous whistle blowers and journalists as they prepare new wars, assassinations and coups.

The witness statements also confirm the extraordinary extent to which these governments have trampled over Assange's legal and democratic rights, including the fundamental and precious protection of lawyer-client confidentiality. This evidence alone requires the US extradition case to be thrown out of court on the grounds of illegality.

According to the evidence provided by the witnesses—videos, audio tapes and dozens of emails—the surveillance operation was extensive. In particular, Assange's meetings with his legal team were videoed and recorded in order to gain material to try to incriminate him and to identify the evidence and legal arguments they would marshal against any prosecution under the US Espionage Act.

Under Morales' express orders, the security company photographed the passports of all of Assange's visitors, took apart their cell phones, downloaded content from their iPads, took notes and put together reports on each meeting. The Ecuadorian diplomats who worked in the London embassy were also spied on.

Morales, a former Spanish military officer, is being prosecuted in Spain, after being charged in October with privacy violation, bribery and money laundering. His company was officially employed by the Ecuadorian government to provide security at the embassy but that became a cover for a bugging operation against Assange.

According to *El País*, two of the witnesses confirmed that, in December 2017, Morales ordered workers to change the surveillance cameras in the embassy and replace them with others that could capture audio. From that moment on, they monitored conversations between Assange and his lawyers, even in the female toilet that Assange and his legal team used in attempt to avoid illegal bugging.

During these meetings with his lawyers, Assange prepared his legal defence. The Australian citizen faces trumped-up charges under the US Espionage Act that carry penalties of a total of 175 years in prison. While awaiting the extradition hearing, due to commence in the last week of February, he also has been sedated and denied adequate medical treatment, placing his life in danger.

El País reported that the three witness statements all described the phrases that Morales used with his most-trusted workers, referring to UC Global's collaboration with the US secret service. These included: "We are playing in the first division," "I have gone to the dark side," "Those in control are the American friends," "The American client," "The American friends are asking me

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to confirm," "The North American will get us a lot of contracts around the world," and "US intelligence."

The recordings from the cameras installed in the embassy were extracted from the hard drive every 15 days—along with recordings from microphones placed in fire extinguishers—and delivered personally to Morales at the headquarters of UC Global, located in Jerez de la Frontera in the south of Spain.

Morales travelled to the US once or twice a month, allegedly to hand over the material to "the Americans." Morales also had installed remote-operated computer servers that collected the illegally obtained information, which could be accessed from the United States.

The witnesses testified that the material on Assange was handed over to the CIA by a member of the security service of Sheldon Adelson, the owner of the casino and resort company Las Vegas Sands Corporation. Adelson is a friend of US President Donald Trump and a large donor to the Republican Party.

Last year, the Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, obtained files evidencing UC Global's spying operation, including on doctors, journalists, politicians and celebrities who visited Assange. UC Global compiled profiles on Assange's London-based lawyer Jennifer Robinson and the head of his legal team in Spain, Baltasar Garzon. The video and audio footage showed a half-naked Julian Assange during a medical check-up and two of his lawyers, Gareth Peirce and Aitor Martinez, entering the women's bathroom for a private conversation with their client.

The extradition and prosecution of Assange is an historic assault on basic democratic principles enshrined over hundreds of years in constitutional and common law, including in the US and Britain.

Assange's legal team has already submitted evidence showing the blatantly political nature of the persecution of Assange, including material relating to Chelsea Manning, the former soldier being imprisoned indefinitely to attempt to force her to testify against Assange. They have also submitted public statements by US politicians denouncing Assange and WikiLeaks that jeopardise any prospect of a fair trial, and evidence relating to abuse of due process, vindictive prison conditions and denial of medical treatment.

In any criminal proceeding, evidence that the prosecution had illegally recorded conversations between the defendant and his lawyers would result in a mistrial, the dropping of charges, the release of the defendant and the disbarring and possible prosecution of all those involved.

In 1973, whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg—like Assange—was prosecuted under the Espionage Act for leaking documents to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The Pentagon Papers revealed how the US government had for years lied to the public in order to expand the Vietnam War, which led to the deaths of three million Vietnamese people and 55,000 US soldiers. Their publication triggered an explosion of public anger and fuelled anti-war protests.

During Ellsberg's trial, President Richard Nixon's "plumbers" broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist and wiretapped his phone. In that case, Judge William Matthew Byrne ruled that the surveillance had "incurably infected the prosecution" and dismissed the charges, setting Ellsberg free.

But even more is at stake in Assange's case, because WikiLeaks has helped expose the much greater crimes being committed by the US and its partners, including Britain and Australia. Moreover, the trampling over legal and democratic rights has advanced far further since the 1970s as the US ruling class has increasingly resorted to military aggression to try to overcome the erosion and decay of the global economic hegemony it asserted after World War II.

Moral appeals to politicians will not halt this travesty, let alone the underlying drive by US imperialism. The fight to defend democratic rights and stop the global lurch toward dictatorship and war requires a mass movement. The new year has begun with the resumption of momentous struggles by the working class around the world against government austerity measures, social inequality, environmental catastrophe and war. This is the force that must be mobilised, against capitalism, in order to free Assange and Manning.

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