

Courage Foundation holds public meeting in New York City in defense of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange

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An audience of about 150 heard a panel of speakers in New York City on February 15 at a meeting in defense of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. He is now being held under harsh conditions in London's maximum-security Belmarsh prison pending the outcome of a request for extradition to the United States, where he faces up to 175 years in prison on trumped-up charges of violating the 1917 Espionage Act. Assange's real crime is his courageous exposure of secrecy, corruption and imperialist war crimes.

The extradition hearing in London is scheduled to begin on Monday, February 24. A rally has been called at the British Consulate in New York City, at Second Avenue and 47th St., for 11 a.m. on that day.

The February 15 meeting, held at the City University of New York Law School in Queens, New York, was organized by the Courage Foundation. Other sponsors included the New York City chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).

The panel of speakers included James Goodale, the former general counsel of the *New York Times* during the Pentagon Papers case of 1971; Renata Avila, a member of the defense team for Julian Assange and a close friend of the journalist and publisher; Glen Ford, the executive editor of the *Black Agenda Report*; and Max Blumenthal, the editor of *The Grayzone* website.

Several others appeared on video, including Daniel Ellsberg, the whistleblower who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the press nearly 50 years ago; linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky; and author Alice Walker.

The meeting opened with brief video greetings from Jennifer Robinson, a leading member of the Assange defense team, who stressed the international significance of the attempt to railroad the WikiLeaks publisher into an American prison. Robinson pointed to the recent attempt by the fascistic government headed by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to bring charges against journalist Glenn Greenwald that are virtually identical to those facing Assange.

The first speaker, James Goodale, related the experience of the Pentagon Papers case, which was at first a civil action attempting to enjoin the *Times* and the *Washington Post* from publishing the classified government study of the quagmire facing US imperialism in Vietnam. Goodale explained that Richard Nixon's attorney general, John Mitchell, who was later jailed in the Watergate scandal, directed that the *Times* and reporter Neil Sheehan be criminally prosecuted under the 1917 Espionage Act for the publication of the Pentagon Papers. However, that the effort collapsed in the face of the deepening scandal and crisis that would lead eventually to Nixon's resignation.

Speaking of the indictment facing Assange, Goodale warned that if it is successful, it means the end of investigative journalism. "This is a case I have dreaded for 50 years. It is a case that we must all fight."

A high point of the meeting was the appearance on video of Daniel Ellsberg. He warned that if the prosecution of Assange succeeds, "the public will know essentially what the government chooses to tell them, however untrue and however selective and misleading. ... It's hard to call that a democratic republic."

Ellsberg explained that both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump had used the Espionage Act to silence dissent. Along with the other speakers, he also stressed the importance of coming to the defense of whistleblower Chelsea Manning, who had already served seven years in prison when she was thrown back in jail last March, where she has been held in contempt for nearly a year after she refused to participate in the attempt to frame up Assange.

Noam Chomsky declared that the vendetta against Assange reminded him of Italy under the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who silenced the voice of Italian Marxist and Communist Party leader Antonio Gramsci, who was imprisoned in 1926 and remained there under brutal conditions until his death 11 years later, at the age of 46.

The second member of the panel to speak was Renata

Avila, who brought greetings from Assange. “He’s one of us, he should be here,” she declared. Assange “has a very long list of enemies. ... His most important ally is the people.” Avila explained that most of the newspapers that had partnered with WikiLeaks in the publication and exposure of corruption and war crimes had now abandoned him. Assange was a political prisoner, she said, who had dedicated his life to the public interest, to resisting secrecy and censorship, rather than using his enormous talents to become wealthy. She warned that the extradition case could drag on until the summer of 2021, and that a powerful movement in defense of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning must be developed and strengthened during this period.

Glen Ford declared that Assange and Manning are being punished because the images made available by WikiLeaks of a massacre in Iraq “demolished the image of the US military as a force for good in the world. ... They have contributed materially to the weakening of the US war machine.” US imperialism claims “the power, the right to police the world, imprisoning and killing anyone who opposes its global supremacy,” he added.

Ford also related the attack on Assange to “Russiagate,” the campaign to use alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election to portray Assange as an agent of a foreign power in order to frame him under the Espionage Act, while launching a campaign of censorship and other attacks on democratic rights. While Washington lies about its concern for human rights at home and abroad, “the United States meddles in the internal affairs of every nation on the earth,” currently targeting elected governments in Syria, Venezuela and elsewhere. “Julian Assange and WikiLeaks were put at the top of the empire’s hit list. ... Assange is of course not a US citizen, he is Australian, but none of that matters” in the campaign to punish him, Ford declared.

The final speaker was Max Blumenthal. He spoke about the years of public demonization of Assange, speaking ironically of his portrayal as “a far-right libertarian, a far-left anarchist, a Russian asset wrecking the otherwise perfectly democratic Democratic Party.” Blumenthal referred to the fact that the vicious persecution of Assange is now being ignored by the mainstream press and public officials, who are complicit in the attempt to silence and destroy him. The attack on Julian Assange threatens “the survival of critical, courageous, adversarial journalism.”

This author spoke from the floor in the brief question period after the speakers, stressing that the WSWS, the most widely read online socialist publication, has, along with the Socialist Equality Parties around the world, been in the forefront of the campaign in defense of Assange and Manning.

In the past three months alone, more than 100 separate reports, statements and interviews on this campaign have been published by the WSWS. Earlier this month, the SEP held a meeting in defense of Assange in Montreal; and over the next two weeks, a series of rallies are being held by the Australian SEP and the New Zealand Socialist Equality Group, in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, Australia, as well as Wellington, New Zealand. The British SEP is holding a meeting in London next Sunday, the day before the start of the extradition hearing there.

The campaign in defense of Assange and Chelsea Manning must be armed with a political strategy. Max Blumenthal, concluding his remarks on Saturday night, advanced the call for support for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in the current Democratic Party presidential primary campaign, along with a pressure campaign to convince him to drop the charges against Assange once elected.

Sanders, who has maintained a shameful silence on the question of Assange, is a defender of the interests of US imperialism, as he spelled out so clearly last week, in his declaration to the New York Times that he would support a preemptive strike against Iran or North Korea. Rather than strengthening, the promotion of illusions in Sanders and the Democrats disarms the campaign in defense of Assange. It only assists the effort to trap the growing resistance to inequality, dictatorship and war within the framework of capitalist politics.

As the WSWS has insisted from the outset, there is only one social force that can successfully lead the fight to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. The defense of these political prisoners is part of the struggle of the international working class against the preparations for world war and dictatorship. The working class must be mobilized independently of and in opposition to the parties and representatives of the capitalist system to advance this struggle.



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