

Freedom for Assange is inseparable from the fight against war and for socialism

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The following speech was delivered by Thomas Scripps, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2. Scripps has written extensively on the ongoing state persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Comrades and friends, at this May Day rally, we reaffirm the International Committee of the Fourth International's solidarity with imprisoned WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Julian Assange, the heroic journalist, is facing the COVID-19 epidemic from behind the bars of a cell in London's Belmarsh maximum security prison.

He is an innocent man, held on remand by the British state on behalf of the American government which is seeking his extradition to face life imprisonment or worse.

In their eyes, Assange *is* guilty—guilty of exposing the brutal war crimes, torture, and diplomatic conspiracies carried out by imperialist governments and covered up by a slavish corporate media.

WikiLeaks lifted the veil on the barbarity of the ruling class in Afghanistan and Iraq. Assange inspired opposition to these crimes among workers and young people throughout the world.

This could not be tolerated by the warmongers in the White House, Downing Street, Canberra, and their allies. The decision was made to use any means necessary to destroy Assange, as a warning to those who might follow his example and to set a precedent for the dictatorial suppression of opposition.

Just as the coronavirus crisis encapsulates the economic, social, political and moral bankruptcy of the capitalist social order, the criminal treatment of

Assange represents the assault on democratic rights made necessary by capitalism's descent into barbarism. Wars of colonial conquest and the imposition of savage austerity demand political repression.

For years, Assange was kept arbitrarily detained in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. His access to proper medical care was denied and his personal privacy invaded as a CIA-organised spying operation recorded confidential conversations with his legal representatives.

After being handed over to a British snatch squad by the Ecuadorian government in April last year, Assange was railroaded into a maximum-security prison, where he has consistently been denied access to his lawyers or to the materials necessary to prepare his defence.

This decade of persecution, in the opinion of medical experts and UN Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer, has amounted to psychological torture. The appalling damage done to Assange's health has rendered him especially vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease now sweeping through the UK's prisons. He has a chronic lung condition and his immune system is compromised.

Yet, in a truly Kafkaesque episode, when the British government announced plans to release low risk prisoners near the end of their sentence to ease overcrowding in prisons, the Ministry of Justice told the Australian Associated Press that Assange would not be considered for release because he was not serving a sentence!

On March 25, Assange's legal team made an appeal for his release on bail in light of the "very real" and potentially "fatal" threat posed to his life by the developing pandemic—which experts warned would spread through the prison estate "like wildfire." With the vindictiveness of a fascist court, Judge Vanessa Baraitser refused this request.

A month later, over 300 prisoners are known to be infected with coronavirus, with a massive 1,700 more suspected cases. Five prison staff have died and fifteen prisoners—at least one of them at Belmarsh.

The unavoidable conclusion is that Assange's persecutors hope to see the COVID-19 disease do their dirty work for them and kill the most significant journalist of the twenty-first century.

All those political tendencies and individuals who refused to defend Assange—and who joined in the slander campaign against him—have blood on their hands. They have participated in a monstrous crime for which they will never be forgiven.

Assange struck a blow against world imperialism, for which he is widely regarded as a hero. The ICFI views him as a prisoner of the class war being waged by the ruling elite against the billions of people now fearing for their lives and livelihoods. His fate is bound up with the struggle for democratic rights, against war and for socialism. He can only be defended through the political mobilisation of the world's working class.

Even amid the suffering of the pandemic, Assange's case must not and will not be forgotten. He has fought courageously for the public's right to know the truth about governments and their crimes. Today, the political representatives of the ruling class—from Trump to Boris Johnson—in their response to the coronavirus, have reminded us that access to the truth is a life and death question. Indeed, it is a revolutionary question!

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties stand in the great internationalist traditions of May Day, which, from its origins in memory of the Haymarket martyrs in Chicago, has rallied workers to defend victims of state frame-ups and persecution everywhere. We stand in the tradition of international solidarity shown by the world working class for the Italian American labour martyrs Sacco and Vanzetti. And we say, Assange must live, and he must be free!

The threat to his life is serious and imminent. But this is not the time for despondency; it is the time for action. The political influence of the ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site* is growing. We pledge here today to deepen our decade-long campaign to secure Assange's freedom and safety. As workers all over the world are forced to confront and defeat a murderous ruling class, the fight to free Assange will assume a

central place in the struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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