

Oppose NUJ censorship of journalist Craig Murray!

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On the eve of Monday's extradition hearing for Julian Assange, Britain's National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is continuing its anti-democratic efforts to muzzle journalist Craig Murray.

For six months, the NUJ Executive has refused Murray's application for union membership. The effect has been to deny Murray press accreditation to cover the extradition hearing in *USA v Assange*, which resumes for up to four weeks on Monday.

Murray, a former British Ambassador-turned-whistleblower, has earned millions of readers for his trenchant reporting and exposure of the US-British show trial of Assange. Drawing on first-hand knowledge of the criminal inner-workings of the British state and his close friendship with Assange, Murray's court reports became the unofficial record of a legal travesty in action.

In October 2019, Murray's account of Assange's case management hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court, including his harrowing description of the WikiLeaks founder's weakened health, went viral, breaking the media's wall of silence and galvanising public opposition. It led to a letter from more than 70 doctors demanding Assange's immediate transfer from Belmarsh prison to a properly equipped teaching hospital to treat the effects of prolonged psychological torture.

Despite—or rather because of—this journalistic record, Murray was excluded from the press gallery during the opening week of Assange's full extradition hearing in February. The 61-year-old was forced to queue each morning in the rain to secure a place in the public gallery.

Six months later, the British state has seized on the coronavirus pandemic to further curtail press access. The NUJ's effective blacklisting of Murray must be seen in this light.

The concluding weeks of Assange's hearing are to be held at London's Central Criminal Court, with just a handful of seats available for members of the public,

ostensibly to preserve social distancing. Access for accredited journalists, in person or via videolink, is being determined by the Ministry of Justice, with the state vetting all applicants. WSWs reporters have received no reply from the MoJ whether its own reporters will be granted access, despite repeated requests for confirmation.

Murray applied for NUJ membership on March 5. Via donations to his blog, he earns more than 50 percent of his income from journalism and is entitled to union membership under NUJ rules. He was previously a freelance member in good standing.

For two months, Murray received no reply to his application. After phone enquiries, Seamus Dooley, NUJ Assistant General Secretary, replied to Murray on May 26 informing him that “written objections” had been received to his membership application. Dooley claimed these were being dealt with in accordance with the “NUJ rulebook” and that he would be in touch (at an unspecified time) to “outline the procedure and timescale involved in considering these objections.”

As Murray pointed out in a reply to Dooley the next day, the NUJ had contravened its own rulebook. NUJ officials had failed to forward his application to the nearest local branch for discussion and a vote, despite the branch having chased it for “some weeks”. Murray asked Dooley, “Is there any precedent for objections being received and the process stopped before the local branch is even notified of the application?”

Moreover, how could the NUJ have received “written objections” to Murray's application when the application form had not left the union's head office? Murray asked pointedly, “To how many people, and precisely to whom, was the application shown...?”

Dooley denied any breach of the Data Protection Act and claimed Murray's application had “not been shared with anyone outside of the appropriate staff”. On June 2, he claimed he would confirm the status of complaints

against Murray later that week, informing him, “you will be afforded a right of appeal *in the event of you disagreeing with the outcome*” (emphasis added). In other words, the NUJ national executive would preside over a secret investigation, concealing from Murray the nature of the complaints against him and denying Murray his right to a defence.

“The union has had the objection for a month or more now,” Murray wrote two weeks later. “It appears quite contrary to natural justice, and to the openness the NUJ should stand for, that I remain the victim of some accusation that is secret.”

Several weeks later, the NUJ told Murray that his objectors believed he is not a “fit and proper person” to join the union. On July 16, Murray commented, “As I lead a pretty blameless personal life, this can only relate to my writings. I find this extremely sinister. It is certainly true that I write things that NUJ members within the mainstream media do not. It is certainly true that I attract massive criticism on social media from a section of mainstream journalists for my writings—on the Skripal case, for example.”

He continued, “The union is supposed to be a union for journalists, not for stenographers to power. I find the flat refusal of the NUJ to tell me what I am alleged to have done wrong to be particularly chilling. I find the entire process of handling my application, and the question of how these objections arose before the application was sent out for comment, deeply suspicious.”

The NUJ’s actions are an attack on press freedom and the public’s right to access information independently of the state-controlled and corporate media outlets. Its internal “investigation”, devoid of transparency and stripping Murray of his rights to due process, mirrors the lawless state witch-hunt of Assange.

The NUJ’s hostility to Murray comes as no surprise to the Socialist Equality Party. The union has long opposed any genuine campaign for Assange’s freedom. At its World Press Freedom Day event in May 2019, the union refused to make a statement in defence of the imprisoned WikiLeaks founder. When challenged, NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet reacted with undisguised hostility declaring, “To focus on Assange would be offensive to the memory of those who have been killed all over the world.”

When challenged by audience members, NUJ official Tim Dawson stated the union was “a membership-led organisation”, pathetically offloading responsibility for his inaction onto the union’s membership. Jeremy

Corbyn’s own pre-recorded message to the event made no mention of Assange’s brutal seizure from the Ecuadorian Embassy just weeks earlier.

It was not until November 2019 that the NUJ National Executive finally passed a resolution opposing Assange’s extradition to the United States and his prosecution under the Espionage Act for exposing war crimes. However, its resolution was never conceived as the basis for a genuine mobilisation in defence of the imprisoned journalist.

In February 2020, Dawson was invited as an official speaker to WikiLeaks’ Don’t Extradite Assange public meeting in London. The meeting signalled efforts to publicly rehabilitate the NUJ and Labour “lefts”, presenting their token statements as evidence of a mass campaign. Dawson cited the reactionary musings of *Daily Express* editor Gary Jones that Assange was “not a journalist”, which Dawson said reflected “quite a commonly held unease among other members of my profession”, before telling the audience it was “irrelevant” whether Assange was a journalist!

According to the NUJ’s website, Dawson represents freelancers on the National Executive and is therefore answerable for the NUJ’s treatment of Murray. This reporter can find no record of Dawson having opposed the NUJ’s sinister backroom operation.

Murray’s description of the NUJ as “stenographers to power” is fitting. It is one that applies to the entire mainstream media, whose journalists are, to one degree or another, “embedded” with imperialist foreign and domestic policy, or who know instinctively which lines should not be crossed.

The Don’t Extradite Assange campaign has issued no statement condemning the NUJ’s attack on Murray. Their entire defence campaign is oriented toward the capitalist state—its parties, politicians, media, trade unions and NGOs. The NUJ’s record on Murray confirms the need for a politically independent movement of the working class to secure Assange’s freedom.

The Socialist Equality Party demands the NUJ end its anti-democratic efforts to muzzle Craig Murray. We urge readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to send letters of protest to NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet: generalsecretary@nuj.org.uk



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