

After the Assange hearing—the fight against imperialism

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The four weeks of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's extradition hearing were a watershed in the collapse of democracy and the descent of world imperialism into abject criminality. Three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unchecked explosion of US militarism, and two decades after the declaration of the "war on terror," not a single legal principle, democratic or basic human right is left standing.

Assange was subjected to a filthy show trial. Sham legal arguments aside, what took place at London's Old Bailey was a process of vicious retribution against a journalist who exposed the barbarism of the ruling class before the world.

While Assange sat in the dock charged with "espionage", the crimes he exposed were recounted by defence witnesses. Their phrases hung in the air of the courtroom, an indictment of the whole capitalist order: "collateral murder" (the wilful killing of unarmed and injured civilians); "extraordinary rendition" (the illegal seizure of untried persons and their disappearance into "CIA black sites"); "enhanced interrogation" (with torture delivered against "hooded and chained" subjects, via beatings, "sodomy", "controlled drowning" and the use of "coffin boxes"); and "wars of aggression"—the crime for which the Nazi leaders were indicted at Nuremburg—leading to the sociocide of Afghanistan and Iraq and the deaths of up to one million people.

Professor John Sloboda of Iraq Body Count spoke to the 15,000 civilian casualties which would never have been recorded if not for WikiLeaks' releases. Famed whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg referred to the organisation's exposure of "torture... death squads and assassination" and the way these were "normalised."

Journalist Andy Worthington described the case of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, captured in Afghanistan and illegally renditioned by the CIA to Egypt, "where under torture he falsely confessed that Al-Qaeda operatives had been meeting with [the Iraqi president] Saddam Hussein to discuss obtaining chemical and biological weapons. Although this false confession was retracted by al-Libi, it was used nevertheless by the Bush Administration to justify the invasion of Iraq in March 2003."

These and countless other revelations sparked mass movements against US-backed dictators in the Arab Spring and

gave a spur to anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment across the globe. That is why an example is being made of Assange. In the words of former CIA director Leon Panetta, aired during the hearing, the case is about "send[ing] a message to others not to do the same thing." The imperialist powers intend to make truth the first casualty of new and even bloodier wars and regimes to come.

No honest observer was fooled by the prosecution's contemptible lie that Assange's case has "nothing to do" with the exposure of war crimes and human rights abuses, or by their dismissal of evidence which spoke to them as "irrelevant." A total of 40 defence witnesses—including legal professionals and scholars, esteemed journalists, doctors, computer science experts, and torture victims—tore apart the threadbare frame-up of Assange as a "hacker" who "failed to redact" and "placed innocent lives at risk."

That such a fraud could be maintained by the representatives of the US government was testimony to the lawless character of proceedings in London's Old Bailey and their blackout in the corporate media. The growth of rampant militarism and imperialist oppression abroad has advanced in lockstep with a turn to dictatorship at home. Assange's hearing built on and extended this process as his every legal right was trampled.

The WikiLeaks founder arrived at the court having spent a year-and-a-half in Belmarsh maximum security prison, in conditions which medical witnesses attested have caused serious psychological damage. He was woken at 5 a.m., strip-searched and shackled every day of the hearing. While in the dock, he was forced to kneel and whisper instructions to his lawyers through narrow slits in the glass wall separating him from the body of the court—his words audible to the prosecution team and unidentified representatives of the US government.

On the first day of proceedings, the court rearrested Assange based on a superseding indictment brought by US prosecutors at the eleventh hour, and then refused to grant his defence team time to prepare a response. Assange saw his lawyers in person for the first time in six months that morning and got his first look at key legal submissions.

In evidence to the hearing, witnesses testified that his legally privileged documents and conversations with lawyers have been seized and spied on by the CIA, who also considered

plans to kidnap or murder him. Others explained that Assange, if sent to the US, will follow a path laid down by previous US prosecutions of terrorist suspects and be disappeared into a system of segregated prison cells and special administrative measures. His ultimate destination will likely be the ADX Florence in Colorado, where US officials have refined the process of psychologically destroying human beings.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser allowed the prosecution ample time to refute this testimony with cynical assurances from US officials that Assange has and will be treated fairly and humanely. Findings by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that Assange has been subjected to years of psychological torture and arbitrary detention were openly ridiculed.

Judge Baraitser was appointed and is managed by Chief Justice Emma Arbuthnot, married to a senior Tory MP whose close links with the UK military were exposed by WikiLeaks.

This pseudo-legal travesty was instigated by charges under the US Espionage Act, effectively criminalising journalism hostile to the interests of the American state and dealing a death blow to the First Amendment. Yet barely a murmur of protest has been registered in the corporate media. The hearing made clear that organisations like the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* initially worked with WikiLeaks to control the release of information, before stabbing Assange in the back when he refused to retreat from his belief in the public's right to know. The prosecution used their shameful denunciations of WikiLeaks as supposed proof that Assange "is not a journalist."

The media's role in his persecution was crowned by their deafening silence on the hearing. Daniel Sandford, Home Affairs Correspondent for BBC News, justified this by tweeting, "I have been in a few hearings, and it is slightly repetitive at the moment." These vetted and well-heeled reporters made their peace with the criminality of the ruling class long ago and have integrated themselves fully with their respective governments and security services. They understand the "Assange precedent" is not meant for their embedded journalism.

Through the Assange case, workers have been given an object lesson in imperialism—a system of violence and repression perpetrated against the world's people by the most powerful states and their adjuncts on behalf of the ruling financial oligarchy. That lesson has proved the utter bankruptcy of the perspective which claims Assange's freedom can be won through appeals to dissident voices within the establishment, either in the press, the judiciary, or parliament.

This was summed up at a "Belmarsh Tribunal" event staged after the hearing by the Progressive International—a collection of political scoundrels including Yanis Varoufakis and John McDonnell—and the official Don't Extradite Assange (DEA) campaign. Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn declared that

Assange would face years more of incarceration as legal appeals were fought in the British, European and US courts. The only alternative, he said, was "for the British government to simply say, that they do not believe [Assange's extradition] would be legally just or proper... It's within their hands to do it."

Corbyn and the DEA are appealing to the most right-wing government in British history, on whose orders the extradition is being carried out and whose leader Boris Johnson hailed the Metropolitan Police's illegal seizure of Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy by congratulating Foreign Office officials for their instrumental role in ensuring that Assange "faces justice." These pleas are worse than useless. Their only effect is to demobilise the social force against which Assange's persecution is targeted and on which his freedom depends.

The precedents for Assange's trial under the Espionage Act are the mass roundups of socialists and anarchist groups carried out in the years after the law was first established in 1917. Fearful of the revolutionary movements swelling across the world, the US government outlawed political opposition to the First World War and agitation for workers' strikes and protests.

Assange's case is preparation for a similar assault on the working class. President Donald Trump, who ordered Assange's arrest and is orchestrating his extradition, is now aping Adolf Hitler in a rapidly developing plot for a presidential coup and the consolidation of a fascist power base in sections of the American state. Republican and Democratic officials alike are organising the savage repression of protesters, with Trump openly agitating for far-right violence. There is every chance that the president could launch a catastrophic military adventure as a gambit to swing the November presidential election or cancel it.

These actions cannot be taken without prompting mass resistance in the American and world working class. As that movement becomes conscious, through its education by the revolutionary party, that it is engaged in is a life-or-death fight with decaying capitalism and imperialism, it will come to recognise the campaign to free Assange as an essential part of that struggle.



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