

# Assange in lockdown as Belmarsh Prison inmates test positive for COVID-19

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WikiLeaks announced this morning that its publisher, Julian Assange, has been placed under lockdown in London's Belmarsh Prison after several inmates in his cell block tested positive for COVID-19.

Infections have reportedly been confirmed among three prisoners in House Block 1. According to WikiLeaks, the governor of Belmarsh wrote to prisoners detained there, including Assange, informing them that cases had been identified.

The letter indicated that all prisoners and staff would be tested, with the results released in 24 to 48 hours. Inmates are prohibited from showering or exercising, and meals will be delivered to them, meaning they are likely to be held in their cells 24 hours a day. The reports were effectively confirmed by prison authorities, who told the British media: "We've introduced further safety measures following a number of positive cases."

The outbreak poses an imminent threat to Assange's life. Since the pandemic began, leading medical experts have repeatedly warned that the WikiLeaks founder would be at significant risk of succumbing to the coronavirus if he contracts the disease. Assange has a chronic respiratory condition and a host of other health issues resulting from his decade-long persecution at the hands of the US, Britain and their allies.

The doctors' warnings, and a bail application in March, have been contemptuously dismissed by the British state. It is deliberately exposing the world-renowned publisher to the threat of infection. This is one prong of the attempt to destroy Assange. The other is the bid to extradite him to the US, where the WikiLeaks founder faces 17 charges under the Espionage Act, and the prospect of 175 years imprisonment, for exposing American war crimes.

In a statement to the media, Stella Moris, Assange's partner and the mother of his two young children, declared: "Keeping Julian in the UK's harshest prison, exposed to a deadly virus and away from his family is not only cruel, it offends British values and democracy itself... I am extremely worried about Julian. Julian's doctors say that he is

vulnerable to the effects of the virus."

The cases in Belmarsh are part of a sharp increase in infections throughout the penitentiary system, amid the resurgence of the pandemic across Britain. Figures from the Ministry of Justice at the end of October showed that 1,529 inmates had been infected since March. That was an increase of well over 600 compared with the September figure of 883 cumulative cases. At least 32 inmates have died.

They are victims of the murderous "herd immunity" policy implemented by the Conservative government, with the support of the entire political establishment. Under this pseudo-scientific doctrine, COVID-19 has been allowed to circulate, so that businesses can remain open and corporate profit-making can continue.

The size of the prison population, including inmates and guards, has made it inevitable that the virus will emerge in penitentiaries when there is widespread transmission in the community.

The dangers confronting prisoners have been compounded by the run-down conditions in which they are held. A parliamentary inspection last year found that 10 of 35 prisons did not meet minimum hygiene and cleanliness requirements. Prisoner rights' advocates have repeatedly documented inadequate healthcare, including shocking cases of gangrene and other life-threatening ailments not being treated.

In effect, tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly poor and working class, have been confined to what are coronavirus incubators throughout the pandemic, with the authorities introducing only the most limited preventative measures.

The case of Assange, a political prisoner who has been convicted of no crime, is the most brazen of all. In early April, he was excluded from a release program covering some 4,000 low-risk inmates, on the extraordinary grounds that he was not serving a custodial sentence and was therefore ineligible.

The previous month, Judge Vanessa Baraitser had rejected a bail application for Assange on the pretext that he was a "flight risk." The ruling has effectively remained in place,

even as most means of leaving Britain have been cut-off by the pandemic.

In August, Moris reported that Assange had not been provided with a mask, the most basic form of protection, throughout the coronavirus crisis. This included when he was in communal areas of the prison. The policy, which has never been explained, meant that Assange would have been at extreme risk of contracting the virus, if it was circulating in his cell block.

The homicidal attitude towards the WikiLeaks founder comes from the top. The government has responded with contempt to letters from Doctors for Assange, a group of medical experts from around the world, who have warned that Assange could die in prison and have demanded his release.

The doctors began their campaign in October last year, prior to the pandemic, after a host of medical issues had forced Assange to be transferred to Belmarsh Prison's medical wing.

As Moris explained in her statement to the press, "it's not just COVID" that imperils Assange. "Every day that passes is a serious risk to Julian," she said. "Belmarsh is an extremely dangerous environment where murders and suicides are commonplace. Julian is one of the most widely recognised press freedom and government accountability advocates alive. UK decision-makers must change course before they cause Julian to lose his life."

British show-trial hearings for Assange's extradition last September heard detailed evidence from psychologists and other medical experts that the WikiLeaks founder suffers the consequences of profound psychological trauma. They reported that Assange has had suicidal ideations for an extended period, and warned that he could take his own life. The conditions of isolation associated with a prison lockdown can only have a further negative impact on his mental health.

Assange's medical issues are the direct consequence of his decade-long persecution and arbitrary detention. In June last year, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer found that Assange had been the victim of medically-verifiable psychological torture.

The major imperialist powers and all their proxies are directly responsible. This includes the corporate media, which Melzer correctly indicted, for its central role in the protracted "public mobbing" of Assange. The professional journalists, who promoted all of the lies and slanders of the intelligence agencies to undermine support for the WikiLeaks founder, are now largely silent on his dire plight.

Within Britain, former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his colleagues, including in the union bureaucracy, have played a central role in preventing a mobilisation of the

working class for Assange's freedom. Corbyn refused to take any action to defend Assange, and has handed over control of Labour to Keir Starmer, a Blairite who openly supports the frame-up of the WikiLeaks publisher.

In the US, both President-elect Joseph Biden and Donald Trump were directly involved in spearheading the international vendetta against Assange. No section of the American political establishment, including the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party, has opposed the attacks against him.

For their part, successive Australian governments have participated in the campaign against Assange, despite the fact that he is a persecuted Australian citizen and journalist. The criminal complicity of Labor and the Liberal-Nationals is backed by the silence of the media and the parliamentary parties.

The imminent dangers to Assange demonstrate the urgency of a fight for his immediate release from prison, and an end to the extradition proceedings. They also underscore the fact that this struggle is inextricably tied to the fight for the social and democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

The same authorities imperiling Assange are threatening millions of workers with coronavirus infection, to ensure that the operations of big business can continue. They are making ordinary people pay for the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, with cuts to social spending and an offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions. The assault on democratic rights, epitomised by the imprisonment of Assange, is the response of the ruling elites to the growth of social and political opposition from below.

This agenda, however, is producing a major escalation of the class struggle, with teachers, auto workers and many others fighting the conditions that are being imposed on them. It is crucial that Assange's liberty be inscribed on the banner of all of these emerging struggles.



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