

Police arrested more than 117 journalists in the US in 2020

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At least 117 journalists were arrested in the United States in 2020, setting a new record for arrests of journalists by a significant margin, according to a report released this week by the Freedom of the Press Foundation based on data compiled by the US Press Freedom Tracker. The number is expected to rise as more than a dozen cases are still under investigation.

From 2017 to 2019, 68 journalists were arrested: nine in 2019, 11 in 2018 and 48 in 2017. This year, in the week from May 29 to June 4 alone, more arrests of journalists were carried out than in these three years combined.

The timing of this police rampage against the press is significant.

Prior to May 29, only two journalists had been arrested. However, following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, mass multiracial protests against police violence and racism spread rapidly across the country.

These protests are believed to be the largest in American history, with an estimated 15–26 million people participating in demonstrations that occurred in 40 percent of American counties.

Immense social anger erupted, with millions of people taking to the streets to protest not just against Floyd's murder, but against the whole police apparatus, which has been built up with hundreds of millions of dollars in funding and free military equipment, while the budgets of social programs and public education have been gutted year after year.

Working class people of all races and ethnicities joined together to voice their anger at the epidemic of police murders and violence that has ravaged communities across the country—with approximately 1,000 killed every year—culminating in calls for the defunding and even abolition of police departments

across the country.

The fact that millions of working class people united in a common cause against the police, the agents of capitalist repression and class rule, sparked fear in the ruling class. Both Republican and Democratic politicians moved quickly to brutally repress the protests through violent police crackdowns, terrified that the protests would expand further.

The Democratic Party was especially afraid that the demonstrations would break free of its identity-politics stranglehold on social movements, prompting it to bring forward Black Lives Matter and pump millions of dollars into racist initiatives, disregarding the fact that the plurality of police violence victims are white and that a black and Asian-American police officer were involved in the murder of Floyd.

President Donald Trump expressed this fear of social unrest most clearly when he told governors, “It’s a movement, if you don’t put it down it will get worse and worse... The only time it’s successful is when you’re weak and most of you are weak.” He further expressed his fascistic intentions, stating that “you’ve got to arrest people, you have to track people, you have to put them in jail for 10 years and you’ll never see this stuff again.”

On June 1, Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and deploy the US military against the protests but pulled back when the reluctant Pentagon brass made clear that plans for martial law were not well prepared and could trigger a civil war.

Both Republican and Democratic governors and mayors, however, were more than happy to oblige Trump’s call to action, deploying local and state police forces along with the National Guard in full force to the streets of dozens of American cities. The result was an escalation in police assaults on protesters and a brutal

campaign to silence journalists in an effort to cover up acts of violence committed by the police. Freelance and major network reporters alike were deliberately shot by rubber bullets and tear gas and had their equipment smashed.

So far in 2020, the US Press Freedom Tracker has recorded 311 physical attacks on journalists, 75 equipment damages, 17 equipment searches and seizures, and more than 960 violations of press freedom related to “national social justice protests.” Thirty-six percent of the 120 arrests were accompanied by a physical attack by the police.

No known officer has been charged with violating the constitutional rights of the press, yet 16 journalists currently face criminal prosecution.

These assaults on press freedom have catapulted the United States toward the top of the global list of press freedom violators.

In 2019, Turkey and China led the globe in imprisoned journalists with 47 and 48 respectively. While there are currently no journalists imprisoned in the US, a record of 120 arrests presents a serious warning that journalists may soon face prolonged detention and more serious criminal charges. Meanwhile, journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is currently being held in London’s Belmarsh Prison, where he awaits extradition to the US, where he faces a possible 175 year sentence for publishing information on American war crimes.

The sharp spike in the number and severity of attacks on journalists is bound up with the decline of American democracy and rapid descent of the US toward dictatorship, a process most clearly expressed by Trump.

President Trump has tweeted negatively about the press nearly 2,500 times since he began his presidential campaign in 2015, an average of 1.5 times a day, and he has repeatedly berated journalists at his political rallies.

Lucy Dalglish, dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, told the Committee to Protect Journalists that she had instructed her students to think twice about wearing press badges to the Republican and Democratic National Conventions this year as it may have made them a target for the police or demonstrators.

While the role that Trump’s verbal attacks on the

press has played is significant, the escalation in press attacks cannot be understood as the product of Trump alone. The whole political establishment desires free rein to suppress protests without the impediment of reporters documenting their abuses.

Now, as Trump builds up a fascist base as part of his coup plotting against the constitution and President-elect Joe Biden, the threat to journalists who attempt to expose state violence grows ever greater. There is no reason to believe that the attack on journalists and demonstrations will cease under Biden, who denounced protesters as arsonists and looters this summer and declared Assange a “hi-tech terrorist” in 2010.

Without the independent intervention of the working class to defend democratic rights, it is only a matter of time before journalists in the United States are persecuted to the same degree as Assange and whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden.



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