

Two years since Assange was seized from the Ecuadorian Embassy

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9 April 2021

Two years ago on Sunday, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was seized from the Ecuadorian embassy in London. He has been incarcerated ever since, fighting extradition to the United States where he faces life imprisonment in barbaric conditions for exposing war crimes, coup plots, mass state surveillance, torture and corruption.

On April 11, 2019, Assange's political asylum status was revoked by the Ecuadorian government and British police entered the embassy building, dragging him away. The recently published diaries of former Foreign Office minister Sir Alan Duncan confirm the involvement of the highest levels of the state in this lawless operation.

Duncan explains how he watched the police raid on a live feed from the "Operations Room at the top of the Foreign Office." Codenamed "Pelican", Duncan recalled how one of its officials looked on, "wearing a pelican-motif tie." Duncan's diary entry concludes, "So, job done at last—and we take a commemorative photo of Team Pelican. It had taken many months of patient diplomatic negotiation, and in the end it went off without a hitch. I do millions of interviews, trying to keep the smirk off my face."

The sadism of the British state's snatch-and-grab operation was matched only by the degraded efforts of the pseudo-left to vilify Assange and blacken his reputation in support of a manufactured sexual assault investigation launched by Sweden in 2010. Rightly fearing that his extradition to Sweden would be a stepping-stone to US extradition, Assange sought asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy. While he was there, his former "media partners", most prominently the *Guardian*, and an international roll call of pseudo-left groups, launched a despicable years' long slander campaign to smear him as a sexual predator.

The Swedish frame-up was a high-level operation. When prosecutors signalled in 2012 they were likely to drop the case—which they finally did for the last time in 2019—the UK Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) sent a message warning "Don't you dare get cold feet!!!" The CPS was then led by current leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer. The support by pseudo-left groups for the CIA's Swedish operation—championed on the basis of gender politics—exposed them as a tool for imperialist interests. By 2012, the affluent social constituency for pseudo-left politics had embraced the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, supporting regime change operations in Syria, Libya and elsewhere.

Republican and Democratic officials alike continued to seek Assange's arrest. In 2018, in the context of a ferocious campaign to drag Assange into their jingoistic, anti-democratic "Russian meddling" campaign, 10 Democratic Party senators wrote to Vice President Mike Pence to demand the Trump administration put pressure on Ecuador to secure Assange's eviction from the embassy.

The Trump administration, it was later revealed, was working with the CIA to spy on Assange, including his privileged communications with lawyers and doctors, and to steal his personal documents. CIA operatives discussed plans for Assange's kidnap or assassination, until Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno agreed to turn him over to the UK police.

Once in the hands of the British state, Assange was subjected to two years of pseudo-legal persecution, culminating in a degrading show trial. Hauled in front of Westminster Magistrates Court just hours after he was seized from the embassy, Assange was found guilty of violating bail. District judge Michael Snow declared, "His assertion that he has not had a fair hearing is laughable. And his behaviour is that of a narcissist who cannot get beyond his own selfish interests."

At a subsequent hearing in Southwark Crown Court, Assange was given the near maximum sentence for bail violation (50 weeks) and sent to Belmarsh maximum security prison. Judge Deborah Taylor accused him of "exploiting your privileged position to flout the law and advertise internationally your disdain for the law of this country."

Assange's time in Belmarsh was characterised by the repeated and flagrant denial of his legal rights, aimed at crushing him and which left him suicidal. He was repeatedly denied proper access to his lawyers and to materials necessary to prepare his defence. When Assange reached the end of his sentence, District Judge Vanessa Baraitser ordered that he continue to be held in Belmarsh on remand. During the initial week of Assange's extradition hearing, held in February 2020 at Woolwich Crown Court, he was held in a glass box, with Baraitser preventing him from speaking or communicating effectively with his lawyers. He was stripped twice and handcuffed 11 times on the first day.

In the run-up to the main hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court in September 2020, Assange was repeatedly denied bail, even as COVID-19, to which he is especially vulnerable on account of a respiratory condition, ripped through Belmarsh prison.

The US government used this time to develop its monstrous assault on democratic rights. The initial indictment of the WikiLeaks founder, unsealed on the day of his seizure from the embassy, charged him with conspiracy to commit computer intrusion, with a maximum sentence of five years. On May 23, 2019, the US unveiled 17 new charges under the 1918 Espionage Act with a combined potential sentence of 170 years. These charges have chilling implications for freedom of the press, criminalising basic journalistic practices and holding them tantamount to treason or espionage.

Another superseding indictment was issued on June 24, 2020, after one phase of Assange's hearing had been completed and a matter of weeks before the defence was due to submit its skeleton argument for

the second. Besides being a gross abuse of due process, the new indictment, based largely on testimony from FBI informants with histories of fraud and entrapment, expanded the framework of the charges to an even wider range of journalistic activity.

The immense significance of WikiLeaks' and Assange's journalism, and the criminality of their persecution, was underscored at his hearing in September. Dozens of witnesses spoke to WikiLeaks' pioneering source protection and the global impact of releases like the Collateral Murder video, revealing the massacre of Iraqi civilians, journalists and first responders by a US Apache helicopter gunship. The US case was exposed as a groundless, vindictive witch-hunt designed to destroy Assange and set a dictatorial precedent for what will happen to any journalists who dare expose imperialist crimes.

With a ruling in favour of extradition considered all but assured, Baraitser delivered a surprise decision against on January 4 of this year. But her politically calculated ruling blocked the extradition request solely on the grounds that it would be oppressive by reason of Assange's compromised mental health and his risk of suicide if he were imprisoned in the US. She accepted every other element of the prosecution's case, including its denial of free speech and freedom of the press, and its justification of the abuse of Assange's democratic rights.

This left the gate wide open to a US appeal. The US Department of Justice quickly responded, "While we are extremely disappointed in the court's ultimate decision, we are gratified that the United States prevailed on every point of law raised. In particular, the court rejected all of Mr. Assange's arguments regarding political motivation, political offense, fair trial, and freedom of speech. We will continue to seek Mr. Assange's extradition to the United States."

Baraitser's actions essentially postponed the real decision on Assange's fate until the outcome of Trump's ongoing coup plot had been decided. Two days after his extradition was blocked, on January 6, a fascist mob stormed the Capitol and came within seconds of seizing members of Congress. The continuing hostility of the British state towards Assange was confirmed by Baraitser's legally absurd denial of bail that same day, leaving Assange in a maximum-security prison with no lawful legal charges against him.

Since then, the Biden administration has continued Trump's pursuit of the WikiLeaks founder—in 2010, Biden had labelled him a "high-tech terrorist". As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) have warned, Assange's persecution is integral to the war drive of US imperialism, escalated by Trump and now intensified by his successor.

Biden has engaged in an aggressive anti-China campaign and is whipping up anti-Chinese xenophobia at home, promoting conspiracy theories on the origin of COVID-19. The US and its allies stand on a cliff edge with Russia over Crimea and eastern Ukraine, with NATO's endless anti-Russia provocations and proxy incursions threatening to spill into war.

Military conflicts of such catastrophic scope can only be pursued abroad by destroying democratic rights at home. WikiLeaks' releases of the Afghanistan and Iraq war logs were a spark to mass anti-war sentiment all over the world. The ruling class in the imperialist countries around the world are determined to prevent their war plans and crimes being reported and have sought to crack down on left-wing, socialist and anti-war opposition. The Assange case is emblematic of this turn to dictatorship.

In the two years since Assange's arrest, two sharply opposed

political perspectives have defined themselves in the fight for his freedom. The official campaign, run by Don't Extradite Assange (DEA), has based itself on rotten appeals to the state and its representatives. The DEA's first champion was former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Throughout the 2019 general election, as leader of the Labour Party, Corbyn maintained a politically criminal silence on Assange, blocking the development of a mass movement against British and US imperialism to secure his freedom. When Corbyn did finally speak, it was to appeal to Boris Johnson and the British justice system that had trampled Assange's democratic rights.

After cobbling together a motley collection of minor parliamentarians, celebrities and civil rights and media organisations—many of which had been complicit in Assange's persecution over years—the DEA campaign reached a new low in the weeks before Baraitser's decision, making an obsequious appeal to Trump for a presidential pardon. Trump instead handed out a slew of pardons to crooks, fascists and war criminals.

When Trump left office, the appeals switched seamlessly to Biden, remaining just as bankrupt.

The ICFI and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties have been vindicated in insisting that the fight for Assange's freedom depends on the development of a mass movement in the working class. The pandemic has proved beyond all doubt that there is no constituency in the ruling class for even the most basic democratic rights, including the right to protest and assembly and the right to life. It has responded to the virus with a policy of social murder and by advancing its preparations for state repression and war on a vast scale.

But these actions have set the capitalist states on a collision course with oppressed workers around the world, who were already entering into major strikes and protests before the pandemic. Assange's ultimate fate is inseparable from this developing conflict—the fight of the international working class against capitalism and the struggle to put the real criminals, the imperialist warmongers and torturers, in the dock.

On the second anniversary of the WikiLeaks founder's seizure, we reaffirm our demand for Assange's immediate, unconditional freedom and our commitment to a programme of class struggle to achieve it.



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