

Julian Assange mural unveiled in Berlin

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Muralists have unveiled a 20-metre-high mural in defence of WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange opposite Willy Brandt House, the headquarters of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in Berlin.

The mural, bearing the hashtag #freeassangeyesterday, was praised by WikiLeaks for drawing attention to the journalist's continued detention. It marked the anniversary of WikiLeaks's publication of the Collateral Murder video, and also of Assange's arrest by British police after his expulsion from asylum in Ecuador's London embassy.

The mural, "Collateral Crucifixion," is a defence of press freedom. Assange, wearing a press body armour vest and draped with cameras, is shown crucified on a prison surveillance tower, topped by a combined British and US flag. At his feet are massed groups of soldiers, while military planes and helicopters fly above. In the background are oil wells and the landscape of the British government.

The mural was produced by Captain Borderline, the collective moniker since 1999 for artists Shanti, Signl, and Dabtar. The Assange mural is the work of Shanti and Signl. According to their website, Captain Borderline's "main activity is painting socially critical and political murals worldwide, but also streetart campaigns, screenprints, animations, films and installations are among their artistic tools."

The mural was unveiled shortly before the 11th anniversary of WikiLeaks's publication of the Collateral Murder video on April 5, 2010. The footage, filmed by the US military on July 12, 2007, exposed bloody war crimes of the illegal, neo-colonial US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

It showed US soldiers in an Apache helicopter firing on unarmed civilians and journalists in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. The crew ask repeatedly whether they have been given permission to open fire on a group going about their business who pose no conceivable threat. When the authorisation is given, the soldiers unleash a massacre that killed up to 18, including two Reuters journalists. The

horror is compounded by the celebration and blood lust of the killers.

Captain Borderline have also produced a 34-second animation of the mural. Oil wells pump and military aircraft jet back and forth as we hear the crew raining down death on the civilians.

The footage has had an indelible impact on millions of people around the world. Yet, a decade on, none of those responsible for the 2007 massacre, or for the illegal invasion which resulted in the deaths of over a million people, has been brought to justice.

The only people to have suffered repercussions from the Collateral Murder footage are those who brought it to the world's attention—Chelsea Manning, the US army private who leaked the video, and Assange, who published it.

Manning served seven years—including a year in solitary confinement—for leaking documents exposing US war crimes. Her sentence was commuted without presidential pardon at the end of the Obama presidency in 2017, but Manning was subsequently harassed and imprisoned in a failed attempt to pressure her into providing material that could be used against Assange. She was again subject to psychological trauma and denied access to adequate medical attention and crippled with punitive financial measures.

The attack on Assange has been even more frenzied and hostile. A manufactured sexual assault investigation was launched by Swedish authorities shortly after the video was published. Its intention was to smear Assange, gaining the backing of liberal and pseudo-left forces internationally, and to enable his extradition to the US.

In 2010, then US Democratic Party Vice President Joe Biden called Assange a "high-tech terrorist." There were repeated calls for his assassination, in line with the extrajudicial policies increasingly undertaken by the US ruling class.

When the bogus campaign was running out of steam, the British Crown Prosecution Service—then headed by Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, later knighted for his work there—wrote to Swedish investigators, "Don't

you dare get cold feet!!!”

In the face of such efforts, Assange was forced to seek political asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy, where he spent seven years under arbitrary detention. In the US there were bipartisan calls for his arrest, with 10 Democratic Party senators writing to Vice President Mike Pence in 2018 demanding the Trump administration pressure Ecuador for Assange’s eviction.

Throughout his years in the embassy Assange was spied on by US agencies. Privileged communications with lawyers and doctors were monitored and his personal documents were stolen. The CIA continued to discuss plans for his kidnap or assassination.

In 2019—the year the trumped-up Swedish investigation finally collapsed—Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno agreed to turn Assange over to the British police. His political asylum was unilaterally and illegally terminated, and on April 11, 2019, British police and security officers dragged a clearly unwell Assange out of the embassy.

Since then, Assange has been subject to a Kafkaesque pseudo-legal persecution culminating in a show trial. Sentenced to a near-maximum sentence for bail violation he was sent to Belmarsh maximum security prison, where he continued to be held after that sentence was served. He was detained on remand and convicted of no crime and while medically vulnerable, even as coronavirus swept through the prison. He was repeatedly denied proper legal access and materials necessary for his defence. At his hearing he was initially held in a glass box, preventing communication with his lawyers.

These ongoing obstructions were designed to allow the US government time to escalate its campaign and pile on charges. The initial indictment, unsealed on his arrest, charged him only with conspiracy to commit computer intrusion, carrying a maximum sentence of five years. Six weeks later, 17 charges under the 1918 Espionage Act had been added, with a combined potential sentence of 170 years. A further superseding indictment, presented after the first phase of the hearing was already completed, expanded the framework of charges, revealing further that the prosecution was directed at any journalistic activity that might expose imperialism.

Captain Borderline are correct that the attack on Assange is directed at all freedom of the press, criminalising basic journalistic practices and equating them with treason or espionage.

It was surprising, therefore, when District Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against extradition on January 4 this year. However, her politically calculated ruling

blocked extradition solely on the grounds that Assange’s imprisonment in the US would compromise his mental health. She accepted every other element of the prosecution’s case, including the denial of free speech and freedom of the press and its justification of the abuse of democratic rights.

This was intended to facilitate a US appeal, which the Department of Justice acknowledged gratefully. In the meantime, Baraitser denied Assange bail again, now leaving him in a high security prison without even legal charges against him. He remains there, while the incoming Biden administration is renewing the campaign against him.

The prominent mural is a timely and welcome protest. Hopes that the SPD will intervene, however, are misplaced. Last year party chairman Sigmar Gabriel was among several former federal ministers to sign an appeal for Assange’s freedom. When he was foreign minister (January 2017-March 2018) and vice-chancellor (December 2013-March 2018) he had plenty of opportunity to aid Assange and offer asylum. He did not and told a press conference that, even in retrospect, he would not have done otherwise.

He said, “I understand every member of the federal government who does not deal with cases like this one in public. That is the difference between my present situation and my past one.” In other words, he is only in favour of Assange as long as this has no practical consequences.

Gabriel went on to talk of “dealing with people with whom we cannot agree, who are strangers to us and sometimes seem odd to us, or who have committed serious crimes.” He did not specify what crimes Assange has supposedly committed.

The Captain Borderline mural is a powerful reminder of the real issues involved in the persecution of Assange, and of the real forces being deployed against him. Assange is imprisoned because he exposed the crimes of imperialism. The assault on his democratic rights is a political onslaught. His fate and freedom are inseparable from the fight of the international working class to put the real criminals in the dock.



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