

Assange turns 50 in Belmarsh prison, his life still under threat

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange turns 50 today. It is an occasion to record the enormous suffering that has been inflicted on the heroic journalist by the imperialist powers, in retaliation for his exposure of their war crimes and human rights abuses.

Assange has now spent more than one fifth of his life facing persecution by the US state and his allies, starting with the freezing of his account by Swiss bank PostFinance and the launching of a bogus sexual assault investigation by Sweden in November-December 2010. He lost seven years from June 2012 trapped in the Ecuadorian embassy in London and has been incarcerated for more than two years in Belmarsh maximum security prison.

During this time, he has missed the birth and early lives of two sons and been kept separate from his partner of six years, and fiancée of four, Stella Moris. Prevented from travelling, and denied the most basic means of communication, Assange has had his globally significant work as a journalist brought to a halt. He has been denied the opportunity to defend himself against a relentless campaign of slander and abuse.

The effects on Assange personally have been devastating, described by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer and campaign group Doctors for Assange as psychological torture. His UK extradition judge was forced to acknowledge that he had suffered severe depression and is at serious risk of suicide.

Far worse is planned. Assange is fighting extradition to the US where he faces charges under the Espionage Act with a possible life sentence. Assange would then be imprisoned in conditions “not built for humanity”, in the words of two former US prison wardens who testified at his trial, subjected to an effective living death—in close to continuous solitary confinement and denied almost all contact with the outside world.

There is no indication that this vicious persecution will cease. A highly calculated ruling by District Judge Vanessa Baraitser in January that Assange could not be extradited to the US on mental health grounds has not changed his conditions one iota. He remains held on remand in Belmarsh and the US Department of Justice has signalled its determination to pursue the case, even as the pack of lies it has assembled against Assange collapses.

No information has been released about the status of the US government’s appeal of Baraitser’s decision, or the counter appeal by Assange’s defence team. It remains unclear when these appeals would be heard, leaving the WikiLeaks founder in a legal limbo. The deciding High Court goes into recess at the end of July, not returning until October.

What is certain is that the ruling class still intend to make an example of Assange, whose work with WikiLeaks did them immense political damage and contributed to an upsurge of anti-imperialist sentiment across the world. WikiLeaks uncovered tens of thousands of unrecorded civilian casualties and the use of death squads and torture during the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The organisation exposed US support for military coups and brutally repressive regimes, its rendition of innocents and minors to Guantanamo Bay and published the infamous “Collateral Murder” video.

Former CIA director then secretary for defence under Obama, Leon Panetta, summarised the American government’s response: “All you can do is hope that you can ultimately take action against those that were involved in revealing that information so you can send a message to others not to do the same thing.”

Besides the destruction of Assange’s health and denial of his freedom, his pursuit has set chilling

precedents which tear to shreds legal and democratic rights. His extradition case has been characterised by the routine abuse of due process, including denying him proper access to his lawyers and key documents and the 11th hour introduction of a new indictment. He and his legal team have been subjected to surveillance by the American state, while plans have been exposed to kidnap and even assassinate him. The charges against him criminalise basic journalistic practice, placing it under the Espionage and Official Secrets Acts.

Every step of this pseudo-legal witch-hunt has been upheld by the British courts. It has proceeded with only the faintest of murmurs in the liberal media and official “left” politics. Any past commitment to democratic rights in these layers has so thoroughly collapsed that they have been able to cough up just a handful of articles and parliamentarians, offering even the most tokenistic support for Assange.

Despite the persistent efforts of the official Don’t Extradite Assange (DEA) campaign to curry favour in these circles, the sum total of their endeavours in the UK is a motley cross-party crew of 24 parliamentarians. The presence of Conservative MP David Davis in this group confirms its utterly toothless character. This right-wing backer of Boris Johnson feels perfectly at ease playing at supporting democratic rights in the company of Labour “lefts” Jeremy Corbyn, Richard Burgon and John McDonnell, who have proven themselves utterly harmless to the British state and its interests.

The 24 do not even feign confidence in their ability to set Assange free, or to build a movement which could. Instead, they have directed their attention to issuing humble appeals to Assange’s chief persecutors. On June 11, they signed an open letter to US President Joe Biden congratulating him on his election and concluding, “We appeal to you to drop this prosecution, an act that would be a clarion call for freedom that would echo around the globe.” The letter reads, “You, like us, must have been disappointed your predecessor launched a prosecution carrying a 175-year sentence against a globally renowned publisher”.

This is said of the man who labelled Assange a “high-tech terrorist” and who has seamlessly continued the Trump administration’s case against the WikiLeaks founder, as part and parcel of America’s intensifying war drive.

As far as the DEA carries out an international campaign, it is to set up similar groups of politically disparate figures in different parliaments around the world making the same lame appeals. On Thursday, an open letter signed by members of the German Bundestag representing the Left Party, the Free Democratic Party, the Greens and the ruling Christian Democratic Union and Social Democratic parties called on Chancellor Angela Merkel “to urgently advocate, during her forthcoming visit to Washington to meet with US President Biden, an end to the persecution of Julian Assange.”

None of this is politically serious or credible. Assange will not be freed by appeals to the conscience of the ruling class. The fight for his freedom depends on the mobilisation of a mass social force in defence of democratic rights and against war, the international working class, who must be alerted to Assange’s plight and organised in his defence.

Amid a resurgence of class struggle in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout, and a dangerous escalation of militarism across the globe, the Socialist Equality Party is confident this perspective will find a mass hearing.



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