

Assange in jeopardy: US extradition appeal hearing begins in London

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26 October 2021

Today the UK High Court begins a two-day hearing of a United States government appeal aimed at securing WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's extradition to the US.

The hearing is the culmination of a campaign of rampant criminality by American imperialism and its allies, stretching over a decade. Its character is summed up in revelations during the last two years that Assange has been the subject of CIA plots for his surveillance, kidnap, and assassination.

Last month, *Yahoo News* reported that the Trump administration tasked the CIA with drafting "options" for Assange's murder. "Sketches" were drawn up and conversations held on "whether killing Assange was possible and whether it was legal". In the event of Assange's attempted escape from the embassy, possibly aided by Russian agents, the UK government had agreed "to do the shooting if gunfire was required."

In 2019, it emerged that UC Global, the security firm at Ecuador's embassy in London where Assange claimed asylum for nearly seven years, had been working with American intelligence to spy on the WikiLeaks founder and his associates. Last year, during Assange's extradition hearing, evidence was given by a former employee of UC Global that plans were discussed to kidnap or poison him in the embassy.

Such relentless state persecution is payback for Assange's courageous role in exposing the war crimes by the US, British and Australian governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. WikiLeaks' collateral murder video, Afghan War Diaries, Iraq War Logs and Cablegate releases galvanised mass popular opposition to war, torture, and state repression worldwide.

The imperialist powers' murderous agenda has been backed by a pseudo-legal witch-hunt against Assange, including the impanelling of a secret Grand Jury that indicted him in 2019, and Sweden's manufactured sexual

assault investigation into the WikiLeaks founder. The Australian government refused any defence of its citizen.

Assange has suffered arbitrary detention, psychological torture, revocation of his Ecuadorian asylum and citizenship, and vindictive sentencing and imprisonment in Belmarsh maximum-security prison. He has been detained on remand without charge, repeatedly and unjustifiably denied bail and subject to relentless attacks on his right to legal representation. The case against him has trampled due process and the factual record and made use of the admitted fabrications, given in exchange for US immunity, of hacker, convicted fraudster and sex offender Sigurdur Thordarson.

By every conceivable legal standard Assange should not only win his case, but have it thrown out of court. The US is appealing a decision that Assange cannot be extradited due to his risk of suicide in America. Now the extradition is openly exposed as a plot to put him in the hands of his would-be murderers.

However, the UK court is not considering matters of law or human rights in this case. The decision before the judges is whether Britain can be seen to rubber stamp what amounts to the extraordinary rendition of the most significant journalist of the 21st century.

The path for Assange's extradition has been laid by Britain's judiciary. In January, amid open preparations for a fascist coup by Trump, District Court Judge Vanessa Baraitser delivered a ruling designed to leave Assange's fate hanging by a single thread. Accepting every rotten plank of the US government's extradition request, she objected solely on medical grounds, finding that Assange is likely to suicide if extradited.

Baraitser's intentions were clear. She refused to release Assange from prison, keeping him in Belmarsh until the American government made its appeal. The US has since taken the highly unusual step of offering worthless assurances on Assange's treatment and been granted

grounds to appeal the legitimacy of medical evidence provided to the court by an experienced and respected psychiatric expert.

Baraitser's original ruling also set the tone for the High Court's response to *Yahoo's* CIA revelations, which will form a major element of the defence case this week. Responding to arguments concerning UC Global-CIA spying on privileged legal conversations, Baraitser stated that she could not reach a judgement on whether US surveillance had taken place. She then added that even if it had occurred, "there is no reason to assume this related to these proceedings" and that the "fruits of any surveillance would not be seen by prosecutors assigned to the case."

Whichever decision the High Court arrives at on this occasion, Assange faces continued prolonged imprisonment. A ruling is not expected for several months and would be followed either way by legal challenges. His partner Stella Moris has warned that Assange could face years more incarceration if he is not swiftly extradited, possibly as soon as next summer. "Both prospects," she said, "are terrifying". Either outcome will see Assange silenced, his life placed in jeopardy. Moris explained that he was "looking very unwell" during her prison visit last weekend.

The Assange case rides roughshod over legal and democratic principles because his persecution is a matter of fundamental political and strategic interest to the world's leading imperialist power. From the beginning, the US and its allies have sought to destroy Assange both as a warning and a precedent to prevent any serious reporting of imperialist war crimes, human rights abuses, diplomatic intrigues and mass state surveillance—to cover up past crimes and to prepare new ones.

These motivations have only strengthened. The danger of war, on a scale which would dwarf the atrocities carried out in the imperialist invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, continues to grow as the US ramps up its aggression against China in Taiwan and the South China Sea. Provocations abroad are coupled with "big lie" propaganda at home, including baseless accusations of a Wuhan Lab origin of COVID-19, and of "genocide" against the Uyghur population of Xinjiang.

Meanwhile, the world's governments are engaged in unprecedented criminality and corruption in their handling of the pandemic, which reasonable estimates suggest has claimed between 10 and 19 million lives.

A freely functioning WikiLeaks, described by Assange as an "intelligence agency of the people", or anything like

it cannot be allowed by the imperialist powers to exist in such a world. Their biggest fear is that future exposures could help ignite the enormous oppositional sentiment that exists in the working class in every country. If Assange is to be freed and defended, it is this social force which must be mobilised.

Immense resources have been deployed in the Assange manhunt, which has proceeded with the blessing of every imperialist government and major political party in the world. The corporate media have either actively backed his persecution or attempted to smother knowledge of the case while formally opposing Assange's extradition. The explosive *Yahoo* and Thordarson revelations went practically unreported.

Moral appeals to these forces, or fond hopes in the eventual wisdom of the UK judiciary, of the kind promoted by the official Don't Extradite Assange campaign, are worse than useless. Attempts to put forward handfuls of tame parliamentary representatives and "activists" as an opposition to this vast conspiracy are a cruel farce. These figures are epitomised by Jeremy Corbyn, who as Labour leader did nothing to defend Assange and will mobilise no one now.

A mass campaign to free Assange must be based on an appeal to the international working class, for whom the struggle against imperialism, its wars and social inequality, is a life-and-death question. The cost of the pandemic and the ruling class's murderous response in human lives, wages and conditions is driving a global wave of working-class struggle, with the US at its centre.

More legal appeals are open to both sides following today and tomorrow's hearing, but all require the agreement of the courts and would almost certainly mean lengthy additional imprisonment for Assange if granted. Averting a railroaded extradition process and ending the continued isolation of Assange and destruction of his health in Belmarsh requires the urgent, organised intervention of workers all over the world.



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