

Germany's PEN Centre nominates Julian Assange as honorary member

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14 November 2021

“We call upon the relevant authorities in England not to extradite our honorary member Julian Assange to the United States of America, where he faces up to 175 years in prison, but instead release him from prison immediately and unconditionally.”

These words are part of a statement issued by the international writers group PEN Centre Germany on November 2, in which the organisation announced it had appointed the founder and spokesperson of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, as an honorary member.

His appointment, the PEN Centre continues, is “linked to concerns for the health of Julian Assange, whose conditions of detention have been described by Amnesty International as torture. The judicial arbitrariness and deprivation of Assange’s liberty are an egregious violation of human rights—taking place in the heart of a Western European democracy, not a despotic regime.”

The PEN Centre Germany is one of 150 associations united in the writers association, PEN International. Its name PEN stands for “Poets, Essayists, Novelists,” and it considers itself to be the “voice of persecuted and oppressed writers.”

Shortly before Assange's appointment, the journalist and author Deniz Yücel was elected on October 26 as the new president of the German PEN Centre. Yücel is the Turkey correspondent of the daily paper *Die Welt*, co-editor of *Jungle World* (a German weekly newspaper published in Berlin) and a former editor of the *taz* newspaper. He was himself imprisoned in Turkey for a year for alleged “terrorist propaganda.”

At its membership meeting in Frankfurt's Paulskirche at the start of November, Yücel said he was “convinced that we as authors, we as PEN, must on principle and for our credibility, always stand up for the freedom of word and art ... even when it hurts. Against

the powerful, against the bad—and if need be, against the good.”

On twitter, Yücel stressed that the decision to appoint Assange as an honorary member of PEN had been made “after careful consideration and deliberation.” The PEN statement says, qualifyingly: “The German PEN Centre takes the accusations of sexual assault seriously, but we are also aware of the doubts repeatedly expressed by Nils Melzer, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, about these accusations and the danger of their inadmissible instrumentalisation.”

The mention of alleged “accusations of sexual assault” in the nomination is completely misplaced. It has long been established that these allegations, which never led to criminal charges, were the result of a state-fabricated plot to extradite Assange from Sweden directly to the US.

Nevertheless, the appointment of Assange as an honorary member of the PEN Centre of Germany is an important and welcome step.

As the PEN Centre’s statement quite rightly says, the attack on Assange is an “egregious violation of human rights” and “arbitrary justice.” For 2.5 years Assange has been in solitary confinement in Belmarsh maximum security prison for exposing imperialist war crimes. He remains in prison even though no verdict has been passed against him, and his extradition to the US was rejected in the first instance. Previous to his time in prison he had already spent 8 years as a political fugitive, in effective isolation in the Ecuadorian embassy.

Assange made accessible to the world public the US military war logs of Iraq and Afghanistan, the diplomatic dispatches of the US and the Guantanamo prison files. Their publication by WikiLeaks exposed

war crimes, torture, attempted coups and corruption by leading US and international politicians. They contributed to the social uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011.

That is why Assange is the prime target of a vicious vendetta involving the governments of Britain, the US, Ecuador, Australia and Sweden but also the German government. The US secret service CIA even considered assassinating him.

In February 2020, the PEN Centre of Germany had already signed the appeal “Release Julian Assange from Detention,” supported by several former ministers of the Social Democratic Party, Free Democratic Party and the Greens, including then SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel. However, it would be utterly naïve to hope that PEN’s appeal could persuade any government politician to take a genuine stand on behalf of Assange.

Germany’s new “traffic light” government (a coalition of the SPD, FDP and Greens) will, like the outgoing “grand coalition” of the SPD and conservative parties, do nothing to further the freedom of Assange. The former government politicians only spoke out in favour of Assange when their words had no practical consequences. The “traffic light” coalition is determined to continue the militaristic, great power policy of the grand coalition.

Assange is behind bars for exposing the crimes of imperialism. The attack on his person and his democratic rights is central to the increasing attacks on the freedom of the press and freedom of expression in every country. His own fate and freedom are inseparable from the struggle of the working class against the return of war and fascism, soaring social inequality and the criminal coronavirus policies of the ruling elites.

Only the international working class can lead this struggle to success. This is the reason why the Socialist Equality Party (SGP, Germany) is mobilising the working class and fighting for independent action committees.

It is explains why the government has denounced the SGP as “left-wing extremist” and put the SGP under surveillance by Germany’s domestic intelligence agency—the *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution).

As the new PEN President Deniz Yücel correctly stated two years ago, the *Verfassungsschutz* is “the

most dangerous authority in Germany” and “incapable of reform.” Yücel received death threats in response to his comment, as did a number of other prominent celebrities, cabaret artists and journalists, addressed with the signature “NSU 2.0”—a reference to the neo-Nazi terror network, which murdered nine immigrant workers and a policewoman.

Julian Assange's defence, his release and the prevention of his extradition to the US is closely linked to the defence of the SGP from state harassment. To this end it is necessary that the international working class clearly understands that democracy and social equality are incompatible with the capitalist profit system and creates the conditions for a socialist transformation of society.



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