

Kremlin sentences US basketball star Brittney Griner to 9 years in a penal colony

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A Russian court sentenced 31-year-old Brittney Griner, a star of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in the United States, to nine years in a penal colony and a \$16,400 fine on Thursday, based on charges that she had deliberately committed the crime of smuggling drugs into the country. Her lawyers announced that they will appeal the verdict.

Griner was arrested at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport on February 17, one week before the imperialist-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24. In her luggage, the Russian police found less than 1 gram of cannabis oil (CBD). Griner pleaded guilty on the charges early in the trial, saying that she had made and regretted "an honest mistake." She had been prescribed the cannabis oil for medical purposes in the US and claims to have accidentally included it in her luggage.

In court, she said, "I never meant to hurt anybody, I never meant to put in jeopardy the Russian population, I never meant to break any laws here. I know everybody keeps talking about political pawn and politics, but I hope that, that is far from this courtroom."

The sentencing of Griner is cruel and completely out of proportion. The average time in jail for this type of crime in Russia, by itself grossly excessive, is only five years, and, according to one of Griner's lawyers, almost a third of those convicted usually get parole.

There is no doubt that the Kremlin, in the midst of a proxy war against the US and other NATO powers in Ukraine, is seeking to make an example of the American athlete and use her as a pawn in negotiations with Washington.

For weeks, the White House has been negotiating a prisoner exchange with the Kremlin, involving not only Griner but also Paul Whelan, a US citizen and former

Marine who was arrested in Moscow on espionage charges in 2018 and sentenced in 2020 to 16 years in prison.

In contrast to Griner, Paul Whelan is a highly dubious figure who has deep ties to the American military and intelligence apparatus. According to the White House, the US has made a "substantial offer" to the Kremlin to exchange Griner and Whelan for the Russian national Viktor Bout, who is serving a 25-year sentence in a US prison for arms trafficking.

The fact that Griner is black and a well-known advocate of the LGBTQ community is likely another motivating factor in the Kremlin's decision to target her. For many years, the Kremlin-controlled media has engaged in an openly racist campaign against refugees and immigrants in both Russia and Europe, while many prominent commentators denounced the 2020 George Floyd protests from the right.

Members of the LGTBQ community in Russia are barred from marrying and displaying their relationships in public and are routinely vilified as "abnormal" in the media. With the war effort, this longstanding reactionary promotion of far-right Russian chauvinism and backwardness, as well as the crackdown on democratic rights, has assumed an evermore vicious character.

But as reactionary as the Kremlin's sentencing of Griner is, workers must reject with contempt the campaign unleashed by the White House and its hangers-on in the media in response to the sentencing. In a statement, US President Joe Biden called the sentencing "unacceptable" and denounced Russia for "wrongfully detaining" Griner as well as Whelan. What nauseating hypocrisy!

The United States imprisons more people than any other country, the majority of them for drug offenses,

many of them based on evidence just as flimsy and concocted as that against Griner. And it is Biden himself who made one of the largest contributions to this tidal wave of repression, sponsoring numerous “law-and-order” bills and shepherding them through the Senate during his years as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Internationally, the US has devastated entire societies in the Middle East and Africa with bombs, drone missiles and outright invasions, killing and maiming millions, and has deliberately provoked the current war with Russia over Ukraine which threatens mankind with a nuclear catastrophe.

The American military and intelligence apparatus are known to have cruelly tortured, illegally detained and assassinated countless civilians, including American citizens, over the past decades. No one can forget the hideous photos of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, stripped naked and forced to pose for celebratory photos with their captors, or the revelations about waterboarding and other crimes at CIA secret prisons.

The most important political prisoner in the world, the Australian-born publisher Julian Assange, has been illegally hounded and tortured at the behest of Washington for over a decade because he revealed some of the most heinous war crimes of US imperialism in the Middle East to the world population. Assange has been detained without charges in Belmarsh prison and is now set to be extradited to the US, where he faces a prison sentence of 175 years. After a British judge announced his extradition in late June, he was stripped naked and placed under suicide watch in an isolation cell, only the latest in a series of horrific attempts to torture him and effectively force his slow death in detention.



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