

Free Brittney Griner!

Hostage to Putin, cynically exploited by Biden

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5 August 2022

The *World Socialist Web Site* demands the Russian government release basketball star Brittney Griner from prison, erase her conviction on trumped-up drug charges, rescind the savage sentence of 9½ years in a penal colony imposed on her Thursday, and allow her to return to her home and family in the United States.

The charge of drug smuggling is a transparent fraud. Griner was in possession of a tiny amount of cannabis oil, prescribed by her doctor for back pains caused by playing a professional sport at the highest level, year after year. She had forgotten to remove two vials weighing a total of 0.7 grams from her luggage before leaving for Moscow and was arrested when they were detected at the airport.

Griner is a world-renowned athlete, not a political figure. But her arrest, trial and sentencing were nonetheless a frame-up from beginning to end, following a script that the former KGB agent Vladimir Putin undoubtedly learned from his mentors in the Stalinist secret police, who carried out the show trials and mass murder of Trotskyists, Old Bolsheviks and other dedicated socialists in the 1930s.

While Putin has seized Griner as a bargaining chip with Washington, the Biden administration is seeking to exploit the Griner case to generate political support for its imperialist intervention in the war in Ukraine. No one should be taken in by the crocodile tears of the White House. This is a government which has allowed one million Americans to die from a preventable COVID-19 pandemic and which is risking World War III to promote the worldwide economic and strategic interests of the financial aristocracy.

Griner was arrested on February 17 when she entered Russia to play for the UMMC professional team in Yekaterinburg. (Yekaterinburg is the fourth largest city in Russia. It was given the name Sverdlovsk during the Soviet era, after the Bolshevik leader Yakov Sverdlov. It returned to its Tsarist name, honoring Catherine, wife of Peter the Great, after the restoration of capitalism.)

There has been little discussion in the American media about why Griner went to Russia, an act of considerable independence coming only a week before the US-provoked

invasion of Ukraine and while the Biden administration was whipping up a militaristic frenzy and demanding all Americans leave Russia as soon as possible.

She had been playing in Russia regularly during the off-season of the Women's National Basketball Association because WNBA salaries are so low compared to those paid in other US professional sports. Griner was one of the top-paid WNBA players but made just over \$200,000 a year. The Yekaterinburg team, by contrast, paid her \$1 million a season, in keeping with the great popularity of women's basketball in Russia and her standing as one of the best known and most accomplished players in the sport, and a two-time Olympic gold medalist.

Griner apparently grew fond of the Russian people and told the court at one point during her trial that she regarded Yekaterinburg as "her second home." According to a profile in the *Washington Post*, "She said she was moved by the comradeship she found with her teammates there and by the enthusiasm of her fans, especially the young girls who would wait outside the team's change rooms to greet her. 'That's why I kept coming back,' she said."

These humane sentiments have been rewarded by the Putin government with arrest, show trial and a barbaric sentence. The purpose of this action has, of course, nothing to do with drug trafficking. Griner has been effectively taken hostage in order to use her in the reactionary horse-trading between Moscow and Washington over the exchange of each other's spies.

The State Department claims that it has offered to release Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, who is serving a 25-year sentence in a US prison, in return for Griner and Paul Whelan, who was arrested in Moscow on espionage charges in 2018 and sentenced in 2020 to 16 years in prison. The former Marine has close ties to the US military-intelligence apparatus. On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed that discussions on such an exchange would proceed through designated secret channels.

There is widespread and entirely justified sympathy for Griner among her fellow athletes and among the American

population as a whole. At Thursday night's game between the Phoenix Mercury and the Connecticut Sun, players stood arm in arm in a circle at half court to observe a 42-second moment of solidarity honoring Griner, who wears No. 42 for the Mercury.

One of Griner's teammates, guard Skylar Diggins-Smith, emphasized that the protest had nothing to do with politics (i.e., the war in Ukraine). "This is a human being and our real-life friend and real-life sister... Nobody wanted to even play today. How are you supposed to approach the game with a clear mind, and the whole group is crying before the game? Because you try to honor her and you try to come out and still play hard for her."

The cruelty of the Putin regime towards Griner should not lead the working class in the United States or in any country to forget that American imperialism is the most powerful reactionary force on the planet and the most vicious. The invasion of Ukraine was Putin's desperate and bankrupt response to two decades of US-led encirclement of Russia, which has steadily expanded NATO through Eastern Europe, and culminated in the fascist-led coup in Ukraine in 2014, instigated by US and German imperialism.

The Biden administration has sought to use the imprisonment of Griner in the most cynical fashion, as an additional element in its propaganda campaign to justify the massive US military intervention in the Ukraine war, including tens of billions in weapons, and the deployment of US special forces to provide intelligence, targeting and battlefield direction for the Ukrainian military.

The White House issued a perfunctory one-paragraph statement after Griner's sentencing, calling it "unacceptable" and pledging "to work tirelessly and pursue every possible avenue to bring Brittney and Paul Whelan home safely as soon as possible."

Former President Donald Trump actually denounced any effort to free Griner. "She knew you don't go in there loaded up with drugs," he said. "She got caught. And now, we're supposed to get her out." This unspeakably foul comment was directed to Trump's racist and fascist supporters, who revile Griner as a prominent black, gay athlete and outspoken advocate of LGBTQ rights.

When it comes to the vicious treatment of prisoners, the United States can more than match Russia. The United States imprisons more than 2 million of its own citizens, twice as many, per capita, as Russia. The prison population has increased by a staggering 500 percent over the past 40 years, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Drug convictions account for by far the largest number of prisoners, many of them, like Griner, convicted on the basis of frame-ups and evidence concocted by the police.

As for the circumstances in which prisoners are held,

American prisons are notorious for violence, disease and death, as well as the widespread use of such torture methods as solitary confinement. There were headlines about Griner being sent to a "penal colony"—a terrible fate, to be sure, should it come about. But there is no such media concern for the hundreds of thousands of inmates in American prisons who work for pennies an hour, or who are contracted out to cost-cutting companies, or mobilized in slave-like chain gangs on roads and fields.

Beginning with the Obama administration, when Biden was vice president, the US government has particularly targeted journalists and those who seek to expose the crimes of US imperialism. The Obama-Biden administration prosecuted more whistleblowers than all previous US governments combined, and sent Army Private Chelsea Manning to prison for seven years for leaking evidence of US atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan to WikiLeaks.

It was Vice President Biden who labeled WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange a "high-tech terrorist," while the Obama administration convened a secret grand jury against him and hounded him into seeking refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. It was Trump whose administration discussed plans to assassinate Assange, illegally bugged his meetings with his defense lawyers, and backed the British police raid which dragged him out of the embassy and put him in Britain's harshest prison.

Now it is the Biden administration which is on the brink of obtaining Assange's extradition to the United States, where he would face a trial on 17 phony charges of espionage, which could bring a jail term of 175 years in a Supermax prison in Colorado.

The working class must demand the release of all political prisoners, whether held in one of Putin's dungeons, or in Belmarsh prison, Britain's Guantanamo, or in the vast American gulag.



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