

World Socialist Web Site interviews CIA whistleblower John Kiriakou about Julian Assange's extradition

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10 October 2022

Protesters rallied around the world on Saturday to oppose the United States government's bid to extradite courageous journalist and whistleblower Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder is being persecuted for exposing vast troves of data implicating American imperialism in crimes ranging from efforts to subvert foreign governments to brutality inflicted on populations under military occupation throughout the world.

Over 200 gathered outside the US Department of Justice in Washington D.C. to rally and hear speeches from a number of speakers. Among the speakers were Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges, Consortium News editor Joe Lauria, and Central Intelligence Agency whistleblower John Kiriakou.

In 2007, Kiriakou disclosed the CIA's role in government torture programs operating out of various "black sites," at secret locations throughout the world.

He was instrumental in revealing the CIA torture of Abu Zubaydah, a "high-value detainee" currently held in Guantanamo Bay. Zubaydah remains confined in the prison camp despite evidence of his torture. Kiriakou explained his revulsion at Zubaydah's treatment in a 2018 *Washington Post* column. He wrote, "I had a moral and ethical problem with torture and that ... I thought it was illegal. Unfortunately, there were plenty of people in the US government who were all too willing to allow the practice to go on."

Despite the US government determining that Kiriakou broke no laws in his disclosure, in 2013 the Democratic administration of Barack Obama prosecuted him and he was convicted and sentenced to 30 months imprisonment for revealing the name of a CIA officer to a reporter, among other things. Kiriakou has gone on to be a highly respected defender of democratic rights.

The *World Socialist Web Site* was able to speak with Kiriakou about the implications of the US attempt to extradite Assange, the defense of democratic rights, and the importance of Assange's plight for working people.

The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.

WSWS: Can you shed some light on what Assange has exposed to the public about the US government, and also speak about the current situation and how this is significant for the political situation today?

John Kiriakou: Sure. Assange's first major exposure was the Chelsea Manning revelations back in 2010. This was tens of thousands of diplomatic cables. Diplomatic cables almost never have anything to do with national security. They are generally accounts of conversations between US diplomats and host-government officials.

Julian, by releasing those documents, embarrassed some US ambassadors, State Department officials. But there was no damage to national security. The government has never alleged that there was

damage to national security. That got Julian on the Department of Justice's radar.

In 2013, [former National Security Agency contractor] Edward Snowden released revelations [about the NSA's warrantless spying on the population] in concert with journalists Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras in the British *Guardian* and Barton Gellman in the *Washington Post*. From the perspective of the intelligence community, that was a bit more damaging. Still, there was no CIA information that was compromised.

WSWS: There is a constant argument you hear from defenders of government secrets that the reason this information cannot be disclosed is that it saves lives of people working undercover, "behind enemy lines."

JK: They say that all the time: "You have the blood of American soldiers on your hands." Name *one* American soldier whose blood is on my hands. They said that to [former NSA official and whistleblower] Thomas Drake. He released unclassified information and they said he had the blood of American troops on his hands.

But, regarding WikiLeaks, that revelation ramped it up to a "tier one" threat. Then the Hillary Clinton revelations from the Democratic National Committee emerged. We learned through Julian Assange that Hillary Clinton rigged the Democratic primaries to steal the nomination from Bernie Sanders. That turned the Democrats against WikiLeaks.

But "Vault 7" really pushed things over the edge. Joshua Schulte, a hacker employed by the CIA, was alleged to have taken thousands of documents that exposed the modern day "Crown Jewels" of the CIA.

WSWS: Could you explain the significance of Vault 7 to some of our readers who might be less informed about this episode?

JK: Vault 7 revealed that the CIA can, for instance, defeat any encryption technology. The CIA can take over your Smart TV and make it double-back as a microphone even when it's turned off. The CIA can remotely take control of your car. For what reason? To drive you off a cliff? Into a tree? Off a bridge? Why would they even need the technology to do that? That was when they decided to prosecute Assange.

You might have heard one of the speakers [at the DOJ rally] say that, as bad as the Obama administration was toward whistleblowers—they prosecuted eight of us—it didn't indict Julian. The Trump administration indicted Julian. Really, the force behind that indictment was [former Trump CIA director and Secretary of State] Mike Pompeo.

Do you remember when Pompeo [in April 2017] called WikiLeaks a "non-state hostile intelligence service"? There was a reason that he did that. Many in the media at the time missed the fact that those were carefully chosen words.

The reason he did that is because if the CIA is going after a foreign intelligence service, state or non-state, that makes it a counterintelligence operation. Counterintelligence operations are the only covert operations that don't have to be reported to the oversight committees. The reason for

that is to guard against the possibility that a member of the committee is a foreign spy.

Counterintelligence operations are the most sensitive things that the CIA does. The fewer people that know about them, the better. If you're not reporting them to the oversight committees, then there's nobody to tell you "you can't do that."

That's when you come up with ideas, maybe, to murder Julian Assange in the streets of central London. Or maybe shoot out the tires on a Russian diplomatic flight were he to board one. You come up with all of these cockamamie ideas that are clearly illegal and there's nobody to tell you "no."

WSWS: This was revealed last year by *Yahoo! News*. Dozens of CIA agents admitted that plans were in place to kidnap or kill Assange in Britain.

JK: I know the reporters who did that story. They interviewed 36 current and former CIA officers who had direct knowledge of the plots. That is astounding. I mean, you might get one source who may say something. If you get a second to confirm it then you've got a story. But to have 36 people confirm that this operation was being planned? That's Pulitzer-worthy.

WSWS: It's virtually impossible to deny it.

JK: Yes, and they didn't deny it. They just said "no comment."

WSWS: In this regard, could you speak about the media attitude toward Assange? The level of demonization is at such a point that the US could theoretically murder him and the media response would be almost indifferent.

JK: I asked someone I'm close to, a cousin, why they weren't interested in the Assange story. They replied: "Julian Assange? Isn't he that Russian spy?" You get that all the time. That's in part because of the mainstream media, which is not interested in covering the story.

I was on a panel recently with a journalist. One of the questions for them was, "why aren't you or other members of the mainstream media not willing to come out in support of Julian Assange?"

He said, and this was just crazy to me: "I don't view Julian Assange as a journalist. I view him as an *activist*."

Even if you don't view him as a journalist, you *have* to admit that he's a publisher. How many stories were written based on the information he published? If Julian Assange goes down because of the Espionage Act, literally *every* national security journalist in America is subject to prosecution just for having sources.

WSWS: The only people that would be allowed to publish anything would be the official stenographers for those in charge.

JK: Have you heard of [NBC chief national security reporter] Ken Dilanian? He is formerly *New York Times*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, serious journalist. A friend of mine, Jason Leopold, did a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for all of the communications between the CIA's Office of Public Affairs and national security journalists. It took him years and a court case to finally get it released. It included an email exchange between Ken Dilanian and the CIA. Dilanian was sending his articles to the CIA for clearance *before* sending them to his own editors. That's not journalism. That's propaganda.

That's not unusual. We see that at the *Washington Post* with [national security columnist] David Ignatius. We see it at the *New York Times*.

WSWS: What you're describing, in terms of the consequences of an Assange prosecution, isn't so much a "chilling" effect on journalism, but its outright illegalization. Under these conditions, *Pentagon Papers* leaker Daniel Ellsberg would be imprisoned today. The US could have remained at war, with hand-picked, "embedded" news reporters who only showed the side of Vietnam that it wanted the public to see.

JK: Absolutely. Ellsberg says this all the time: What happened to him, would *not* happen today. Today, he would be locked in some dungeon for the rest of his life and nobody would ever hear from him again.

WSWS: We have referred to Julian Assange as a ~~class~~ What we mean by this is that he has been punished primarily because of what he revealed for the world's population to see. While the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* might have defended these rights in court 50 years ago, now it has fallen to a movement of the international working class, in a mass political movement, to defend him and what he stands for. Can you give me your thoughts about that statement?

JK: I couldn't agree more. I come from a long line of labor union members. My grandfather told me a story, a long time ago, about how he risked losing his job at a steel mill in Pennsylvania because he took a day off to go to a Sacco and Vanzetti rally. This has always been very important to us.

Even though, like every family, my parents wanted to achieve "the American Dream" of owning a home and raising children, they never lost that class consciousness. Part of the reason we are having trouble getting Julian's message out there is because, unfortunately, many Americans have lost it.

But you're absolutely right that this is something that all working people can and should take up, but they haven't. One of the reasons they haven't is because the mainstream media has been successful at squelching this story.

I would say most people in this country don't understand his story or what he did. He exposed war crimes and crimes against humanity for which no person was ever prosecuted. The United States murdered Reuters journalists in cold blood! Not only was nobody prosecuted, we don't even know the *names* of the helicopter pilots and gunners that carried it out. After all these years, the CIA still won't admit that it has a drone program!

So we really do have to bring people together to demand Julian Assange's release and recognition of the public service that he has performed.

WSWS: We're supporting the campaign of Will Lehman, a socialist worker who is running for president of the United Auto Workers union. He is running as a socialist. This is unprecedented in the UAW's history. I mention this because workers are being drawn into these discussions on bigger issues.

Perhaps my last question to you is to ask if you could maybe imagine you're speaking to an autoworker, explaining to him why the First Amendment should be defended just like their wages should be?

JK: Wow. There are very few things, in my view, that are more important than the First Amendment of the US Constitution. If we've lost that, we've lost everything.

I think it's fantastic that a socialist is running for president of the United Auto Workers. We need someone who can connect with other workers and pull them away from this dangerous kind of populism that we've experienced for the past several decades.

WSWS: You're referring to American nationalism.

JK: Yes. This "America First" stuff is nonsense.

WSWS: Internationalism is a central plank of Will's campaign. He is aiming to unify workers across borders. Auto companies operate internationally, workers cannot allow workers in other countries to be pitted against them.

JK: Absolutely not. We have to be in this together. It is the only way to win.

WSWS: Mr. Kiriakou, thank you for your time and insights.

JK: Thank you.



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