Belmarsh Tribunal in Washington D.C. makes bankrupt appeal to Biden to drop charges against Assange

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27 January 2023

On January 20, the Belmarsh Tribunal—named after the maximum security prison in the United Kingdom where WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange has languished for three years—convened in Washington D.C. to demand that US President Joe Biden drop charges against Assange, who currently faces extradition to the US and a 175-year prison sentence.

While the tribunal heard important testimony from whistleblowers such as Daniel Ellsberg and principled journalists and civil rights activists such as attorney Margaret Kunstler, it was marred by the bankrupt orientation of the "Progressive International"—which hosted the event—whose entire outlook consists of an appeal to the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

Assange, 51, has been charged under the 1917 Espionage Act for WikiLeaks' exposure of war crimes committed by the US military in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2010, WikiLeaks published the now infamous Collateral Murder footage of US Apache helicopters massacring as many as 18 unarmed civilians and journalists in Baghdad. The subsequently published Iraq War Logs, made up of US Army field reports, detailed systematic war crimes committed against the civilian population of Iraq.

The tone for the tribunal was set by Croatian philosopher Srecko Horvat, who in his opening remarks made a ludicrous amalgam between Thomas Jefferson and President Joe Biden, on the basis that both are hypocrites; Jefferson for owning slaves and "nominally" espousing equality, Biden for nominally defending freedom of the press. He ended his remarks with the first of many appeals to Biden to drop the charges against Assange.

Important testimony was provided by Jeffrey Sterling, a former CIA official turned whistleblower, who compared the Espionage Act to the anti-literacy laws during the slavery era, which were designed to prevent slaves from receiving an education because, in his words, "an educated slave won't be a slave for long."

Similarly the Espionage Act, a deeply reactionary law first enacted in 1917, was used to suppress opposition to the United States entry into the First World War.

Sterling denounced the legal travesty of the case against Assange, describing the Espionage Act as a "because we say so" law, given that the government has not had to prove any harm that was caused by Assange's revelations.

Testimony was provided by civil rights attorney Margaret Kunstler. While her principled stance in defense of Assange is to be applauded, in her remarks she further laid the political groundwork for an appeal to the Democratic Party when she rooted the beginning of the persecution of Assange in 2017, when Donald Trump assumed the presidency. The implication being that Biden and the Democrats can be persuaded to reverse course and drop charges. In fact, it was the Obama administration that spearheaded the initial assault on Assange.

The appearance of Jeremy Corbyn at the panel, who was introduced as the "pure opposite" of Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, was a shameful display of hypocrisy. In his demagogic address, Corbyn lamented the complicity of elected officials in the US and elsewhere in the persecution of Assange, saying, "Your silence makes it worse for democracy as a whole." He ended with a bland appeal to US officials to "Speak

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up!”

His appeal to Biden is an echo of his 2021 appeal to the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, as part of the bankrupt Don’t Extradite Assange (DEA) campaign, which promptly fizzled out. Corbyn’s response to this was to throw up his hands and declare, “I’ve done all I can!”

This appeal to the Democrats was taken up by nearly every speaker, including Betty Medsger (*Washington Post* journalist who covered the leaked FBI files in 1971) and Steven Donziger, who gave important testimony about the “corporatism” of the US security apparatus, referencing the police murder of the climate activist in Atlanta at the beginning of the year. Despite this, he thereafter called upon Biden to “step up” and free Assange.

In his remarks to the tribunal, whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg—who most recently released documents showing just how close the US came to using nuclear weapons against China during the Taiwan crisis in 1958—spoke about the intentionally ambiguous wording of the Espionage Act, which allows prosecution not just of those who leak sensitive information, but also individuals who merely possess it, overriding the First Amendment. With that in mind, he called on Biden to “indict me along with Julian Assange and others, or to drop this unconstitutional attempt to extradite Julian.”

Finally, there was a moving address provided by Assange’s father, John Shipton, who denounced the hypocrisy of the Western democracies, who trumpet their “freedom” while persecuting journalists.

Horvat concluded the tribunal by saying it had provided “convincing testimony” that would hopefully “convince Biden to drop charges.”

The tribunal provided no serious analysis of the nature of Assange’s persecution or the growth of authoritarian forms of rule throughout the world. While it spoke to elements of this tendency, it could not explain it. It could not answer “why,” in fact it could not even pose this question in any serious manner.

This is par for the course for the Progressive International, originally formed by US Senator Bernie Sanders in collaboration with such figures as the Greek politician Yanos Varoufakis, who served as finance minister for the Syriza government in 2015, when he oversaw the imposition of austerity measures on the Greek workers.

Sanders, for his part, has faithfully served the US ruling class by directing mass opposition to both capitalist parties back into the Democratic Party, with the illusory aim of “reforming” this party of imperialist reaction.

The speakers could not offer any solution aside from an appeal to the same forces responsible for erecting the police-state apparatus. In his capacity as vice president in the Obama administration, Biden presided over an unprecedented expansion of the power and reach of the US security state. Whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden who exposed this growth of unaccountable power—revealing, for instance, that the National Security Administration (NSA) was secretly spying on millions of Americans—were ruthlessly persecuted.

The Obama White House crossed another Rubicon with the advent of targeted assassinations using drones, effectively extrajudicial executions even of American citizens, without due process. With this history in mind, appealing to Biden to reverse course now amounts to asking the devil to voluntarily cut off his own claws.

The defense of journalists such as Julian Assange, and the most fundamental democratic rights to free speech and press, cannot be left in the hands of any section of the ruling class. The most principled journalists must turn towards the most powerful social force on earth, and the only one that can possibly defend democratic rights—the international working class.

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