

Free Gershkovich, and stop the vicious persecution of Julian Assange

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The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the immediate release of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, arrested March 29 in Russia and charged with espionage. Gershkovich was arrested last week in the city of Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk) in the Ural Mountains, which is a center of the Russian arms industry. He has previously reported on the impact of the war in Ukraine on the families of Russian soldiers, and on the economic dislocation caused by the US-led campaign of sanctions.

The 31-year-old reporter was born in the United States to a Soviet Jewish family who emigrated in the 1970s and settled in New Jersey. He has worked in Moscow as a reporter for the past six years, first for the *Moscow Times*, then Agence France-Presse, and, since January 2022, for the *Journal*.

The Biden administration and NATO have responded with alacrity to the arrest of the reporter. President Biden, on his way to Mississippi to survey tornado damage, took the time to tell reporters outside the White House that his message to Moscow was “Let him go.” Secretary of State Antony Blinken called Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Sunday about the detention. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the arrest would be on the agenda of a NATO foreign ministers meeting Tuesday.

On Sunday, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Gershkovich was “caught red-handed while trying to obtain secret information, collecting data constituting a state secret under the guise of a journalistic status.”

The WSWs is not in a position to judge the allegations against Gershkovich. Given the nature of the American media, there is a murky line between journalism and the state. At the same time, the Putin government, which represents a faction of the Russian oligarchy, may be seeking to suppress the publication

of information that it does not want released.

In any case, as a matter of principle, the arrest of Gershovich must be opposed. The arrest of journalists anywhere legitimizes the arrest of journalists everywhere.

That being said, it is necessary to call attention to the staggering hypocrisy of the Biden administration and the NATO powers. To call the protests of the White House a case of the pot calling the kettle black would be an understatement.

Beginning with the Obama-Biden administration, more whistleblowers have faced charges under the Espionage Act in the past decade than in all previous US history.

The most well-known case, which has drawn worldwide condemnation, is the prosecution of Julian Assange, the founding editor of WikiLeaks.

Assange has been held in Britain’s high-security Belmarsh prison for the past four years, since British police raided the Ecuadorian embassy in London on April 11, 2019. He had been claiming refuge there—effectively imprisoned by a British police cordon—since 2012. Since his arrest, Assange has been fighting extradition to the United States, where he faces espionage charges that could result in 175 years in a supermax prison for terrorists and serial killers.

President Biden, whose administration now condemns the jailing of Evan Gershkovich, denounced Julian Assange as a “high-tech terrorist” because WikiLeaks made public military files documenting US atrocities in Afghanistan and Iraq, leaked to it by the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning—who herself spent seven years in prison, much of that in solitary confinement.

Indeed, one of the most significant exposures of Manning and Assange was the “Collateral Murder”

video documenting the US massacre of a dozen civilians in Iraq, including two Reuters news staff.

Manning also supplied WikiLeaks with State Department files documenting US diplomatic conspiracies to subvert and overthrow governments, as well as records exposing the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

Another WikiLeaks exposure was dubbed Vault 7, a massive trove of CIA hacking and espionage tools. This release led Mike Pompeo, then Trump's CIA director, to brand WikiLeaks a "hostile, non-state intelligence service," effectively declaring open season on the web publication. Since then, the CIA has organized illegal surveillance of Assange and his attorneys and discussed targeting him for kidnapping or assassination.

Another noteworthy contrast between Gershkovich and Assange is the issue of consular access. The US State Department has moved aggressively to demand the Russian authorities allow officers of the US embassy in Moscow to speak directly with the jailed reporter, so as better to uphold his rights. Julian Assange is an Australian citizen, but a succession of Australian governments, including the current Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, have done as little as possible to gain access to Assange, and nothing at all to insist on his release and repatriation to Australia.

As for the corporate media, so pervasive is its hostility to Assange that it enforces a virtual blackout on the efforts to defend him. His father and brother, John Shipton and Gabriel Shipton, are currently visiting the United States, hosting public showings in US cities of the documentary film *Ithaka*, made with the cooperation of Assange's family and supporters. There has been near-zero coverage in the "mainstream" press, leaving the Shiptons to appear on the fascist Tucker Carlson show on Fox News, one of the few venues open to them.

The treatment of Assange is only the most egregious example that can be cited of the glaring hypocrisy of American imperialism with regard to press freedom. The Committee to Protect Journalists noted that in the United States "at least 110 journalists were arrested or criminally charged in relation to their reporting, and around 300 journalists were assaulted in 2020, the majority by law enforcement"—primarily in connection with the brutal suppression of the protests against

police violence that year.

The American ruling class and media, moreover, is currently engaged in an escalating campaign targeting Chinese academics, with unfounded and blanket charges of espionage, as well as seeking to suppress the Chinese-made social media app TikTok.

The hypocrisy of the Biden administration in relation to the arrest of Gershkovich is part and parcel of the hypocrisy that has characterized the US-NATO war against Russia as a whole. The American ruling class, dripping with blood and repression, proclaims that it is defending freedom and democracy the world over, and thinks that no one will see through the lies.

The struggle against the persecution of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, now in its 13th year, is the most important campaign to defend press freedom in the 21st century. This protracted experience has one great lesson: there is no constituency for the defense of democratic rights in any section of the capitalist ruling class or the corporate media which it controls. This fight must be carried out in, through and by the working class, on the basis of a socialist program in opposition to war and capitalist exploitation.



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