Four years since the arrest and imprisonment of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange

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April 11 marks four years since WikiLeaks founder and publisher Julian Assange was violently dragged from Ecuador's London embassy and arrested by the British police. Since that time, Assange has been imprisoned, without interruption, in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, described by some as "Britain's Guantanamo Bay."

Assange's ongoing detention, in a facility designed to hold terrorists and violent criminals, is not because he has been convicted of any crime. Its sole purpose is to facilitate a US extradition request that has been denounced by human rights groups as a dire attack on freedom of the press.

His only "offense" is to have published true information as a journalist, exposing US-led war crimes. That includes US Army documents showing thousands of civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan that had been covered up by the American government and gross violations of international law, from US-NATO massacres to torture.

For all of these horrific actions, the only person who has faced prison time is Assange, who exposed them.

The footage of Assange's arrest shocked people around the world. Not only was the journalist manhandled by the British police. His physical condition had also markedly deteriorated. In the last years of his stay, the Ecuadorian Embassy had been transformed from a place of refuge to a de facto prison, including spying and other intrigues, which have since been revealed to have included CIA discussions of a possible kidnap or murder of the WikiLeaks publisher.

The arrest was itself a crime.

Assange's status as an internationally recognised political refugee has been repeatedly upheld by the relevant United Nations bodies. He was arrested, moreover, at the instigation of the US government. Its pursuit was the very basis for his refugee status, meaning the right-wing Ecuadorian government's expulsion of Assange violated the fundamental principle of non-refoulement, which bars an asylum seeker from being returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.

Nevertheless, some may have harbored illusions that at least Assange would receive access to medical care, that he was unable to receive in the confines of the embassy, and that he would be afforded legal proceedings, which if they were based upon due process, precedent and evidentiary standards, he could not lose.

Any such illusions, however, have been shattered. Assange's four years of detention have been a litany of abuses.

Assange has now been incarceration in Belmarsh Prison for some 1,460 days. Given that he is 51 years old, turning 52 in July, that constitutes almost 12 percent of his adult life. If the period of his asylum is added, Assange has been in some form of detention for close to 11 years, or almost a third of his adult life.

His custody in Britain has been characterised by two interrelated processes, both furthering the US goal of destroying Assange. The first has been a complete indifference to the deterioration of Assange's health. The second, the commitment of the judiciary to do everything possible to further the legal campaign against the WikiLeaks publisher.

It was in November 2019 that eminent medical experts first publicly warned that Assange's health was declining to the point that he may die in prison and demanded his immediate release. Since then, the British courts have repeatedly rejected bail applications, despite the fact that Assange is not serving a sentence for any crime and is a frail and non-violent intellectual.

The entirely foreseeable consequence of those decisions has been his further deterioration, with Assange suffering a stroke behind bars, contracting COVID-19 and, according to his relatives and lawyers, becoming more unwell.

This has gone hand in hand with almost innumerable judicial attacks. The UK is proceeding with the US request for Assange, even though the relevant treaty between the two nations explicitly bars extradition for political offenses, and the charges against the WikiLeaks publisher, under the Espionage Act and for publishing documents that exposed the American government, are explicitly political.

The "legal process" has rolled on and advanced, despite

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the US case for extradition collapsing. In June 2021, Sigurdur "Siggi" Thordarson, a convicted criminal from Iceland, admitted that his testimony against Assange had been lies, proffered in exchange for immunity from prosecution.

Extraordinarily, those admitted lies remain in the current US indictment. The esteemed British judges have simply ignored the fact that the indictment, whose merits they are adjudicating, contains openly acknowledged falsehoods.

Then in September 2021, Yahoo News published a detailed investigative report. Based on the statements of more than 30 current and former US officials, it demonstrated, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Trump administration and the CIA had discussed and plotted the illegal kidnapping or assassination of Assange in London. In the process of this operation, they had also extensively surveilled his confidential discussions with lawyers and private consultations with doctors.

A criminal indictment against Assange was only drawn up to bolster these extra-legal and gangster-like plans.

If any of this occurred in Russia or China, the corporate press, together with Western politicians, would have no hesitation in denouncing it as an infamous frame-up and political persecution. But instead, Assange's detention continues, and the prospect of extradition grows ever closer.

Definite lessons must be learnt. There is no shortage of support for the WikiLeaks publisher, who is viewed by broad layers of workers and young people as a heroic and principled figure. But that support remains latent and has yet to take the form of a mass movement fighting for his freedom.

Undoubtedly, the lies, obfuscations and most often silence of the corporate media has played a role in this.

But a definite political perspective also shares responsibility. For the past four years, the official WikiLeaks-backed campaign has focussed on the backroom lobbying of capitalist politicians and other prominent individuals. Plaintive appeals have been issued to virtually every government and leader, from Trump, to Biden in the US, and Johnson and the Labourites in Britain. In Australia, illusions were promoted that the Labor government, elected last year, would mark a break with its conservative predecessor and defend Assange as a persecuted Australian citizen.

But those illusions have been, or should have been, dashed. All of the governments and official political parties maintain an open support for the persecution of Assange, or a tacit complicity. Even as it is exposed as a lawless victimisation, they proclaim their respect for the "legal process" that is aimed at throwing Assange into a CIA dungeon for the rest of his existence.

Over the past four years, the political content of the case has become ever clearer. The attempted US extradition is not only retribution for Assange's exposure of past illegal wars. It is also an attempt to intimidate the widespread opposition that exists to the new and even greater crimes that American and world imperialism are preparing.

A quarter of Assange's British incarceration has coincided with the war in Ukraine. That conflict, stoked, prepared and instigated by Washington, is now indisputably a proxy war between the US and NATO on one side and Russia on the other. Only this month, documents leaked online have shown that US troops are on the ground within Ukraine and are directing the fighting.

This is just one front in what is developing as a global war. With the full support of the Labor government that refuses to defend Assange, the Biden administration is activating longstanding plans for a direct conflict with China, which is viewed as the chief threat to American imperialist economic dominance.

As in the 20th century, the drive to war is incompatible with basic democratic rights, and is inevitably accompanied by frame-ups, victimisations and political persecution.

But the war is unfolding, under conditions of an immense growth of the class struggle internationally, with explosive upheavals spanning from Sri Lanka to France and virtually everywhere between. This emerging global movement, which has revolutionary implications, is the basis not only for the struggle against capitalist austerity, but also for the fight against war and in defence of democratic rights.

It is to the emerging mass struggles of workers and young people that defenders of Assange and of civil liberties must turn. Governments will only free Assange if they are compelled to do so from a mass movement from below. The WSWS and the SEP will continue to do everything possible to raise the Assange case in the struggles that are emerging and to encourage workers entering into struggle to inscribe the fight for his freedom on their banner.

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