Julian Assange freed after plea deal with the US

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Julian Assange walked free from Belmarsh Prison yesterday, where he has been incarcerated for more than five years. Footage posted by WikiLeaks showed the journalist at liberty as he boarded an international flight leaving Britain.

Assange has reportedly agreed to plead guilty to a single count under the US Espionage Act. He will appear tomorrow morning in a US court in Saipan, capital of the American territory of the Northern Mariana Islands in the western Pacific. When the agreement is signed off by a judge, Assange is set to be free under time served and to return to his native Australia.

The arrangement represents a massive victory for Assange, whose liberation will be welcomed by defenders of democratic rights and opponents of imperialist war around the world. It is an enormous climbdown by the American government, which since 2019 had sought Assange's extradition so that he could be prosecuted under 17 Espionage Act charges carrying a maximum sentence of 170 years imprisonment, i.e., life.

The plea deal demonstrates there was never any legal basis to this attempted prosecution, even within the hollowed-out framework of bourgeois law and draconian national security legislation. It was always a brutal and politically motivated witch hunt, aimed at silencing and destroying Assange because he had exposed historic US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington's criminal conspiracies the world over, and gross violations of human rights.

Assange is being freed as a result of his own extraordinary and courageous resilience in the face of vast state persecution, and the indefatigable efforts of his supporters, including his family, legal team and WikiLeaks colleagues. A protracted global campaign demanding Assange's liberty won the sympathy and support of millions. For years, masses of people have regarded Assange as an heroic figure, and his persecution as unjust and criminal.

In a statement earlier today, WikiLeaks declared: "Julian Assange is free. He left Belmarsh maximum security prison on the morning of 24 June, after having spent 1901 days there. He was granted bail by the High Court in London and was released at Stansted airport during the afternoon, where he boarded a plane and departed the UK."

WikiLeaks stated that this was the "result of a global campaign that spanned grass-roots organisers, press freedom campaigners, legislators and leaders," which had "created the space for a long period of negotiations with the US Department of Justice." It added that: "After more than five years in a 2x3 metre cell, isolated 23 hours a day, he will soon reunite with his wife Stella Assange, and their children, who have only known their father from behind bars."

In a video prerecorded last week and released today, Stella noted that it was exactly twelve years since Assange had entered Ecuador's London embassy to seek protection from the US vendetta. "This period of our lives, I am confident now, has come to an end," she said.

Stella hailed an "incredible movement," involving people from around the world, that was committed to Assange's freedom, the wellbeing of his family and "what Julian stands for: truth and justice." She appealed for ongoing support, including for an emergency fund to assist with Assange's new life, including medical treatment he will require.

Acting WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristin Hraffnson added, "The cost to Julian, of course, has been to be deprived of freedom for all these years in the battle for

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journalistic freedom, the freedom to publish, the foundation of democracy." He concluded: "I can say in earnest that without your support, this would never have materialised, this day of joy, this day of Julian's freedom."

The US persecution will be recorded as a milestone in the breakdown of democracy and the increasing criminality of the ruling elite.

For years, successive American governments and their allies in Britain, Australia and elsewhere proceeded with the pursuit of a journalist, as civil liberties and human rights groups globally condemned it as a mortal assault on press freedom.

In 2019, then United Nations Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer announced his finding that Assange had been the victim of medically verifiable psychological torture, perpetrated by the American and allied governments, along with official institutions and a complicit corporate media. The same year, hundreds of doctors first warned that Assange's health was declining dramatically in Belmarsh Prison and that he could die behind bars.

Further exposures of the witch hunt followed. In 2021, Sigurdur "Siggi" Thordarson, a convicted Icelandic criminal and star witness for the US government, admitted that his testimony against Assange had consisted of lies proffered in exchange for immunity from American prosecution.

Then, in September 2021, former US officials confirmed to *Yahoo! News* that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had spied on Assange while he was a protected political refugee in the Ecuadorian embassy. This included illegal surveillance of his privileged legal conversations. Most explosively, they stated that leaders of the CIA and then President Donald Trump had in 2017 discussed abducting Assange and rendering him to the US or assassinating him.

The US agreement to a plea deal was undoubtedly motivated by fears that these criminal activities and more would be exposed and that they would not stand up to scrutiny, even in a stacked national security court.

The deal was also struck under conditions of a major political crisis in the US, associated with this year's presidential election. There were likely fears within the ruling establishment and state apparatus that Assange's extradition could intensify this crisis and further inflame opposition to the bipartisan program of imperialist war and increasing authoritarianism.

A Department of Justice court filing stated that the federal District Court in Saipan had been selected to finalise the plea deal "in light of the defendant's opposition to traveling to the continental United States" and its proximity "to the defendant's country of citizenship, Australia, to which we expect he will return at the conclusion of the proceedings."

Assange had been compelled to plead guilty to a single Espionage Act charge of "conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defense information." That is one last act of petty vindictiveness by the Department of Justice and the Biden administration, directed against a journalist who has already had more than ten years of his life taken away in an illegitimate pursuit. It has the character of an attempt by the American government to save face amid its backdown.

Assange's liberation is a major victory. The US decision to employ the Espionage Act in the plea deal, however, underscores that the American government has not repudiated the dire threat to press freedom and civil liberties contained in its protracted pursuit of Assange.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties have insisted since 2010, the Assange case has been a spearhead of a crackdown on opposition to war, amid an eruption of militarism and imperialist barbarism. That is underscored by events today, including the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and advanced preparations for a catastrophic conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific.

To fight war and the assault on democratic rights that accompanies it demands the building of a political movement of the working class, against all of the governments and a capitalist system which, as the Assange case has demonstrated, is hurtling towards authoritarianism.

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