

Julian Assange is free, but the struggle to defend democratic rights continues

Statement of the World Socialist Web Site editorial board
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On Monday, Julian Assange walked out of the UK's Belmarsh Prison a free man, following five years of imprisonment and nearly 15 years of persecution by a cabal of imperialist governments led by the United States which hounded him for exposing their crimes. This afternoon, a US court in the Northern Mariana Islands signed off on a plea deal, ending the American attempt to extradite Assange, who is returning to Australia.

Assange will forever be seen by future generations as a fighter for freedom of speech and democratic rights. His persecution will be viewed as one of the most vicious witch-hunts in modern history.

The *World Socialist Web Site* sends its warmest greetings and congratulations to Julian Assange on his release. We also congratulate all those who have played an outstanding role in fighting Assange's persecution. Foremost among these are his wife, Stella Assange, his father, John Shipton, and his brother, Gabriel Shipton.

Among Assange's leading public defenders are the musician Roger Waters and human rights campaigner Craig Murray. We note with sadness that the courageous journalist John Pilger, who fought tirelessly for Assange's release, did not live to see this day, nor the famed whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.

The Biden administration's decision to release Assange is a major political climbdown and a de facto admission by the US government that the case against him had been a fraud from the beginning. The White House made a calculated decision that a trumped-up political trial of a courageous journalist in the United States would expose the fraud that American imperialism is waging war around the world in the name of "democracy."

Assange's persecution has been a foul campaign of lies and defamation. Four successive presidential administrations, including Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden, sought to silence this courageous journalist.

Julian Assange founded WikiLeaks in 2006, following the illegal US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in the "war on terror." WikiLeaks was an audacious and effective initiative to use information technology to do what serious journalists are supposed to do: Expose illegal acts that the government wants to keep hidden.

In 2010, Julian Assange and WikiLeaks published a series of documents revealing rampant war crimes by the US military. The Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary were the most comprehensive exposures of imperialist criminality since the Pentagon Papers of the 1970s.

The Iraq War Logs detailed the killing of 66,081 civilians by US forces as part of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. WikiLeaks also published the Collateral Murder video, which showed the massacre of over a dozen unarmed civilians, including two Reuters journalists, in Iraq by US forces.

In November 2010, WikiLeaks began publishing excerpts from hundreds of thousands of US diplomatic cables. These exposed the daily illegality of imperialist politics, including the plotting of coups, the cultivation of foreign politicians as secret US assets, and other attacks on democracy all over the globe.

In response, the US intelligence agencies instigated a campaign to destroy Julian Assange as part of a systematic effort to purge independent media outlets and orchestrate the total integration of the media with the US national security apparatus.

Assange was targeted in a state-operated frame-up. The means by which this was initiated are of particular importance. In order to create an audience for Assange's persecution, they set out to completely blacken his reputation. The state made calculated use of the gender politics of the affluent upper-middle class pseudo-left, which insisted that allegations of sexual assault were to be believed even when they were obvious state-sponsored frame-ups.

The *Guardian* newspaper in Britain, which served as an outlet for middle-class layers enamored with identity politics, did everything it could to give these allegations legitimacy.

In December 2010, prosecutors in Sweden opened a case against Assange on the basis of fabricated sexual misconduct allegations, all of which were subsequently dropped. The efforts by Swedish authorities to extradite Assange—from where he could be extradited to the United States—forced him to seek refuge in Ecuador's London embassy in 2012.

The International Socialist Organization demanded in 2012 that the public "take these rape allegations against Assange seriously." Socialist Alternative insisted that "serious allegations of rape" against Assange "must be investigated."

The witch-hunt against Julian Assange took place alongside the vindictive campaign to arrest and prosecute Edward Snowden, who escaped Assange's fate only by fleeing to Russia, and Chelsea Manning, who was imprisoned for seven years by the Obama administration.

In 2016, WikiLeaks published the Podesta emails, which documented systematic efforts by the Democratic Party to rig the 2016 primary to the detriment of Bernie Sanders and the benefit of Hillary Clinton. In response to the revelations, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the chairperson of the Democratic National Committee, resigned in disgrace.

But the Democratic Party launched a counter-attack, falsely accusing WikiLeaks of "colluding" with the Russian government to influence the 2016 presidential election. After the loss by Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump in 2016, the Democratic establishment and US media became, if possible, even more viciously hostile to Assange.

The years-long systematic campaign to poison public opinion against Assange by the US media and pseudo-left created the conditions for the Trump administration to formally charge Assange with espionage in 2018. In April 2019, British police burst into the Ecuadorian embassy and dragged Assange out, to Belmarsh prison, where he was imprisoned for five years.

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* all enthusiastically endorsed Assange's arrest and extradition to the United States. Jeff Bezos' *Washington Post* was the most explicit, declaring that Assange was "long overdue for personal accountability."

The *New York Times* praised his arrest, declaring: "The administration has begun well by charging Mr. Assange with an indisputable crime." The *Guardian* led the pack in vindictive slander, falsely and absurdly claiming that Assange held meetings with Trump campaign aide Paul Manafort.

Every major bourgeois newspaper descended into the gutter in order to discredit Assange, printing lies on command from the government. No denunciation was too grotesque.

Jeremy Corbyn, who poses as a supporter and defender of Assange, was almost completely silent about Assange's incarceration in Belmarsh Prison during his time as Labour Party leader from 2015 to 2020.

In contrast to the pseudo-left organizations that joined the witch-hunt or said nothing, the Trotskyist movement—the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—launched a campaign to mobilize support within the working class on an international scale. As a movement that has experienced immense persecution, we immediately stood in solidarity with Assange. We are immensely proud of our contribution to his defense.

In hundreds of articles, the WSWS exposed the right-wing witch-hunt against Assange. Our articles on Assange's persecution were read hundreds of thousands of times. The WSWS and ICFI organized rallies around the world, involving

hundreds of participants and leading journalists, such as Pilger, as speakers. In 2018, we held the webinar "Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship," to which Assange sent greetings shortly before his internet access at the Ecuadorian embassy was cut. (A selection of these articles can be accessed here.)

Though Assange is free, the global capitalist offensive against democratic rights is only accelerating. For every tactical retreat by imperialism, there is a more brutal counterattack. There should be no illusion that the Biden administration's decision to release Assange was motivated by democratic principles or that the danger to democratic rights has passed. The truth is, as long as these conditions exist, Assange will never be out of danger.

In fact, by effectively torturing a journalist into admitting violations of the Espionage Act by disseminating true information in the public interest, the Biden administration has set a dangerous new precedent for the attack on press freedom.

The basic underlying conditions behind the persecution of Assange—global war and extreme levels of social inequality—not only persist, they are intensifying. The US and NATO powers have backed a genocide in Gaza that has killed more than 47,000 Palestinians. Plans are well underway for a massive escalation of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, including the direct deployment of NATO troops.

In Ukraine, Bogdan Syrotiuk, the courageous fighter for socialism and opponent of war, has been imprisoned for opposing the Zelensky regime. The Biden administration has waged a campaign to criminalize opposition to the genocide in Gaza, carrying out thousands of violent arrests of peaceful protesters.

During its campaign to free Assange, the WSWS explained that the struggle for democratic rights must be rooted in the working class and connected with the fight for socialism and against imperialist war. This central lesson grows ever more significant amid an escalating global imperialist war: The struggle to defend democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system.



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