The imperialist “lie in the soul”

Politicians celebrate “World Press Freedom Day” as Julian Assange languishes in prison

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UNESCO holds the event, it avows, to celebrate “the fundamental principles of press freedom, to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.”

Those claims are hollow and duplicitous, as the facts demonstrate.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange remains locked up in a high-security prison in London and faces the threat of rendition to the US. Why? Because he and his organization took seriously “the fundamental principles of press freedom” and actively shed light on both the daily corruption and criminality of governments and corporations internationally and the murderous activities of the American military in particular. As one of Assange’s lawyers has observed, Washington is “seeking to extradite a foreign journalist to face criminal charges for publishing truthful information.”

Meanwhile, another UN body, its Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, registered its disapproval Friday of the “disproportionate sentence” of 50 weeks imprisonment meted out to Assange for violating bail, which it noted was “a minor violation.” In 2015, the Working Group, part of the UN Human Rights system, expressed its opinion that Assange was being “arbitrarily detained” by the governments of Sweden and the UK and that he was “entitled to his freedom of movement and to compensation.” That opinion was ignored by the British government, as Friday’s will be.

In any event, no one associated with UNESCO or World Press Freedom Day made mention of Assange during this week’s events. Indeed, remarkably, one of the keynote speakers at the main celebration in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia hosted by the African Union was the British Foreign Secretary, the Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt.

The “right honourable” Mr. Hunt was one of the British government officials responsible for the brutal seizure and incarceration of Assange April 11. Following the WikiLeaks publisher’s arrest, Hunt said in a statement, “What we’ve shown today is that no one is above the law. Julian Assange is no hero. He has hidden from the truth for years and years and it is right that his future should be decided in the British judicial system.”

In his address in Addis Ababa, Hunt, according to a press release, “set out his vision to improve media freedom.” We might be forgiven for suggesting that the Foreign Secretary, in presiding over the vindictive persecution of the globe’s most prominent investigative journalist, had already “set out his vision,” not with prepared remarks but with the rude violence of the Metropolitan Police Service.

In the course of his speech, a tissue of outright falsehoods and empty platitudes, Hunt told his audience in Ethiopia that “the progress of humanity clearly shows that wisdom arises from the open competition between ideas when different viewpoints are given the oxygen to contend freely and fairly.” Hunt might have added, “As long as those different viewpoints sustain the official one. Otherwise, the supply of oxygen will be cut off.”

The presentations in Addis Ababa were dominated by the fears of all the participants, imperialist and African bourgeois politicians alike, of growing popular discontent and the perceived need to suppress oppositional voices.

This gave the speeches by Hunt and others—and the general approach at present of authorities all over the world to the question of “press freedom”—their contorted and dishonest “doublespeak” character. What governments actually want is freedom from “press freedom.” The ruling elites themselves want to be able to operate freely, that is, without the interference of dissenting and “disruptive” voices.

These concerns lie behind the systematic effort to censor and neuter the internet, justified by pious references to the dangers of hate speech, xenophobia, online harassment, concocted statistics, misleading media reports, the alleged manipulation of elections and “populist rhetoric.” Of course, misinformation, deceit and the fomenting of every form of backwardness and prejudice have been the bourgeois media’s stock-in-trade everywhere since time immemorial, about which no one in a position of authority has ever thought to complain. It is precisely the breakdown of the hitherto effective mechanisms
of misinformation and deceit that has the powers that be up in
arms and fuels the ferocity of Assange’s persecution.

Along these lines, UNESCO’s “Journalism, Fake News &
Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and
Training” (2018) argues that “authoritative sources” and
“credible journalism” have been damaged by what they term,
in an imperishable phrase, the current “information disorder.”

The authors argue that social media is “undermining
democracy” by “creating echo chambers, polarisation and
hyper-partisanship,” by “converting popularity into
legitimacy” and by “allowing manipulation by populist leaders,
governments and fringe actors.”

The “Handbook” points anxiously to the phenomenon of
“news publishers struggling to hold onto audiences as barriers
to publication are removed, empowering any person or entity to
produce content, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and compete
for attention.” And it furthermore warns that in “the high-speed
information free-for-all on social media platforms and the
internet, everyone can be a publisher. As a result, citizens
struggle to discern what is true and what is false. Cynicism and
distrust rule. Extreme views, conspiracy theories and populism
flourish and once-accepted truths and institutions are
questioned.”

The vehemence of their conservative, antidemocratic and
pro-establishment views and the depth of their desire to protect
“once-accepted truths and institutions” help explain why the
very respectable, well-spoken organizers of World Press
Freedom Day hope that Assange and everyone like him rot in
jail until the end of time.

If UNESCO and the rest of this crowd were serious about
“disinformation” and “misinformation,” in any case, they
would present as Exhibit No. 1 the American media’s
mendacious and calamitous campaign over “weapons of mass
destruction” in Iraq, the greatest “fake news” operation of
modern times by far, which has led to the death of more than
one million people and the devastation of an entire region.

Leon Trotsky once observed that “Every historical epoch has
not only its own technique and its own political form, but also a
hypocrisy peculiar to itself.”

How is it possible for Hunt, on the one hand, to announce
that he and other officials are launching “a global campaign to
protect journalists doing their job and promote the benefits of a
free media,” and, on the other, to do his utmost to muzzle and,
if possible, silence Assange forever?

In fact, this goes beyond mere hypocrisy. English economist
and social scientist John A. Hobson, in his valuable
Imperialism: A Study (1902), argued that such official
“compartmentalizing,” this “genius of inconsistency, of
holding conflicting ideas or feelings in the mind
simultaneously,” was “no case of hypocrisy, or of deliberate
conscious simulation of false motives.” He contended that
rather this was “the condition which Plato terms ‘the lie in the
soul’—a lie which does not know itself to be a lie.” This,

Jeremy Hunt was right about one thing in Addis Ababa. “If
problems and tensions are bottled up then they are far more
likely to boil over,” he cautioned. “Stopping journalists from
reporting a problem does not make it go away… The truth is that
when governments start closing newspapers and suppressing
the media, they are more likely to be storing up trouble for the
future than preserving harmony.”

He simply has no idea.

All over the world, workers are engaged in a growing strike
movement in defense of their jobs, wages, and social rights. It
is this social force, not the corrupt representatives of the
capitalist oligarchy, that form the real social basis for the
defense of democratic rights.

On Saturday, the International Committee of the Fourth
International will hold its sixth annual online May Day
celebration. A central focus of the event will be the
organization of the working class in defense of Assange and
whistleblower Chelsea Manning. We urge all readers of the
WSWS and all those seeking to defend freedom of expression
to register and participate.

David Walsh

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