

The class issues in the fight to free Julian Assange

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The indictment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on 17 charges under the 1917 Espionage Act is a political turning point. At stake are two issues that are inextricably connected: the personal fate of a courageous journalist who has exposed government criminality and corruption, and a new stage in the destruction of democratic rights in the United States and internationally.

The new charges make clear that if Assange is extradited to the US from the UK, he faces the rest of his life in prison, or worse. If Assange is convicted on all counts, the sentence could be up to 175 years. Moreover, another grand jury remains empaneled to consider further charges, including potentially those that carry the death penalty.

At the same time, the decision to charge Assange under the Espionage Act for distributing and disseminating truthful information about state actions is a frontal assault on the First Amendment protections of free speech and a free press.

Assange is charged with *receiving* documents related to “national defense.” That is, if Assange can be prosecuted, so can anyone who accesses the documents from WikiLeaks or shares them online. This is the pseudo-legal formula for a police state.

Assange is the victim of one of the most massive political frame-ups in modern history. The attitude taken toward this frame-up defines the class standpoint of organizations and individuals.

Those responsible, including the Trump administration and all factions of the political establishment, represent a ruling elite that has colluded and conspired to undermine democratic forms of rule. The media, particularly the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other publications affiliated with the Democratic Party, stand out on this platform of shame.

On Thursday night, the *Times* published an editorial, “Julian Assange’s indictment Aims at the Heart of the First Amendment,” that exposes its duplicitous role.

The *Times* editorial board feigns surprise at the new indictment, calling it a “marked escalation” that “could have a chilling effect on American journalism as it has been practice for generations.”

In April, shortly after Assange was violently seized from the Ecuadorean embassy in London, the *Times* praised the actions of the Trump White House, writing that “the administration has

begun well by charging Mr. Assange with an indisputable crime.” Supporting Assange’s arrest, the editors wrote that his case “could help draw a line between legitimate journalism and dangerous cybercrime. Once in the United States, moreover, he could become a useful source on how Russia orchestrated its attacks on the Clinton campaign.”

Does the *Times* expect anyone to believe that it has suddenly become aware of the dangerous implications of Assange’s persecution?

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in its editorial board statement, published April 12, the day after Assange’s arrest, that the initial charges are “a transparent lie, the purpose of which is to facilitate Assange’s extradition and provide the Ecuadorean and British governments with a pretext that they are not turning Assange over to a government that might subject him to torture and execution.”

This has been confirmed. The initial charges also provided the justification for the *Times* and the other servile media to support his illegal arrest.

The *Times* has spent the better part of a decade blackening Assange’s reputation. Even in an editorial supposedly dedicated to criticizing the actions of the Trump administration, the newspaper cannot restrain itself. “There is much to be troubled by in Mr. Assange’s methods and motives, which remain murky,” they write.

What “troubles” the *New York Times* is that Assange has behaved like a real journalist should, exposing government crimes, including the massacre of Iraqi civilians. His motives are not “murky.” They just do not conform to the foreign policy interests of the military and intelligence agencies for which the *Times* functions as a mouthpiece.

Further attacking Assange, the *Times* writes that the newspaper “treated Mr. Assange as a source, not a partner [when publishing news reports on documents provided by WikiLeaks], and the relationship was not an easy one; his indifference to the risks of exposing intelligence sources was a particular source of friction.”

Here the *Times* links to a 2011 statement published by then-executive editor Bill Keller that makes clear the character of the “friction” between the *Times* and Assange. Aside from innumerable slanders and slurs directed at Assange, Keller’s comment is dedicated to proving how “responsible” the *Times*

was in coordinating its publication of reports on the WikiLeaks document with the US government.

Keller notes that the *Times* held daily meetings with officials in the State Department, Pentagon, CIA and FBI. “Before each discussion,” he wrote, “our Washington bureau sent over a batch of specific cables that we intended to use in the coming days. They were circulated to regional specialists, who funneled their reactions to a small group at State, who came to our daily conversations with a list of priorities and arguments to back them up. We relayed the government’s concerns, and our own decisions regarding them, to the other news outlets.”

In other words, the *Times*, unlike Assange, is embedded in the American state and functions as an instrument of the intelligence agencies.

The *Times* concludes its editorial published Thursday night by declaring, “Mr. Assange is no hero. But this case now represents a threat to freedom of expression and, with it, the resilience of American democracy itself.”

To which one can reply, yes, Mr. Assange is a hero, and the *Times*, by participating in his persecution, has demonstrated that it has no commitment to “freedom of expression” or “American democracy itself.”

With “defenders” like the *Times*, the US government hardly needs a prosecutor. Other media outlets have followed suit. The *Washington Post* expressed its concern that the Trump administration had jettisoned the “smart, careful route,” which “could have locked Mr. Assange up for years.”

The British *Guardian* expressed its view that Julian Assange should be sent to Sweden instead of the United States, to face manufactured allegations of sexual misconduct. It epitomizes the outlook of privileged layers of the upper middle class that used such operations, tied to identity politics, to promote reactionary political agendas.

MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, who has distinguished herself for being among the rottenest of the rotten in attacking Assange, expressed her “lack of concern about Julian Assange’s ultimate fate,” declaring him a “spectacularly unsympathetic figure” who sought to elect Trump, before declaring her concern for the First Amendment implications of Trump’s actions.

What lying frauds! The fact is that their own campaign against Assange has culminated in a monumental attack on free speech. This is not an accident but the logical outcome, and is in complete conformity with their own politics. The *Times*, Maddow, and the many others who have participated in this spectacle, have spread lies and laughed at Assange’s fate, have condemned themselves forever.

As for the Democrats, they have remained almost entirely silent about the latest indictment. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has said nothing. Nor has Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, who stated in April after Assange’s arrest, “I hope he will soon be held to account for his meddling in our elections on behalf of Putin and the Russian government.”

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the supposed “democratic socialist,” has maintained a shameful silence throughout the persecution of Assange. On Friday, he published a mealy-mouthed tweet that called the indictment of Assange “a disturbing attack on the First Amendment,” but avoided mentioning Assange’s name, let alone calling for his release and the release of Chelsea Manning. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which is merely a faction of the Democratic Party, has also said nothing, nor has the DSA-affiliated *Jacobin* magazine.

Assange has also been deserted by the middle class affluencia, which has promoted the despicable frame-up based on allegations of rape and sexual misconduct to justify their own support for his persecution. Over the past quarter century, this layer has become openly pro-imperialist and hostile to democratic rights.

The conclusion that must be drawn is that the defense of Assange is a class question. The support of the Democratic Party, the media and the organizations of the upper middle class in his persecution is bound up with their support for imperialism and capitalism, and therefore their hostility to what Assange has done: reveal the truth.

Assange’s life and freedom, and the freedom of Chelsea Manning, depend on the intervention of the working class.

In a powerful statement released to journalist Gordon Dimmack on Friday, Assange wrote from the notorious Belmarsh prison, “I am defenceless and am counting on you and others of good character to save my life.” He added, “The days when I could read and speak and organise to defend myself, my ideals and my people are over until I am free. Everyone else must take my place.”

The fight for Assange’s release from prison in the UK, opposition to his extradition to the US, and the demand that he be safely returned home to Australia must be taken up by the broad mass of the population. It must be connected to the fight against imperialist war, which threatens to engulf the entire planet, the growth of fascism and authoritarianism, and opposition to social inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* call on all workers and youth, and all those who uphold democratic rights, to come forward and take an unequivocal stand: Free Julian Assange!

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To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>