German politicians and cultural professionals demand release of Julian Assange

By Peter Schwarz
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German-speaking politicians, cultural workers and journalists have published a joint appeal, “Release Julian Assange from prison,” which supports the demand “for the immediate release of Julian Assange, on medical grounds as well on the basis of the rule of law.” The 130 initial signatories have now been joined by 22,000 other supporters.

The appeal expresses “great concern for the life of the journalist and founder of Wikileaks” and quotes the findings of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, saying, Assange showed “all the symptoms typical of victims of prolonged psychological torture.” The appeal also refers to the open letter from more than 60 medical doctors, who demand “Assange be transferred to a university hospital, as his state of health is now considered life-threatening.”

“It is obvious that Julian Assange cannot recuperate under the current conditions of detention, nor can he prepare for his extradition proceedings, which are scheduled to begin on February 24, 2020,” the appeal says. “Both constitute serious violations of fundamental principles of human rights and the rule of law, making a fair trial impossible and exposing Julian Assange to considerable suffering and health risks.”

The appeal goes on to say, “We remind the German media that Assange is one of their own and that the defence of press freedom is a fundamental tenet of democracy. Notwithstanding the allegations levelled against Assange, we urge the United Kingdom, on the human rights and medical grounds outlined above, to release Julian Assange from custody immediately so that he can recover under expert medical supervision and exercise his fundamental rights without hindrance. We also call on the German Government to make representations to the British Government to this effect.”

Among the numerous cultural professionals who support the appeal are the directors Claus Peymann, Volker Schlöndorff, Milo Rau and Frank Castorf, the actor Rolf Becker, writers Sibylle Berg, Daniela Dahn, Eugen Ruge and Uwe Timm, cabaret artists Volker Pispers and Georg Schramm, musicians Igor Levit and Wolfgang Niedecken, the philosopher Richard David Precht, publishers Reinhold Neven DuMont and Jakob Augstein, and the former West Deutsche Rundfunk (WDR) director Fritz Pleitgen.

The PEN Centre Germany, Reporters Without Borders, the German Journalists Union in Verdi and the Whistleblower Network e.V. are also among the first signatories of the appeal.

It was initiated by investigative journalist Günter Wallraff, who has made a name for himself since the 1960s with his social and socio-political reportage. On February 6, Wallraff, Gabriel, former Interior Minister Gerhart Baum (FDP) and the Left Party Member of Parliament Sevim Da?delen jointly presented the appeal to the media at the Federal Press Conference.

The publication of the joint appeal for the liberation of Assange is part of a change in the public presentation of the case in Germany. Up to now, the media had reported only sporadically on the case and, above all, repeated the false accusations and slander against the journalist.

This has changed in the last two weeks. For the first time, many media outlets have provided critical information about the Assange case, drawing on the research of UN Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer, who has long protested against the persecution of Assange and warned of its consequences for press freedom.

On January 31, the Swiss online publication Republika published an in-depth interview with Melzer under the title, “A murderous system is being created before our eyes,” in which he meticulously unpicks the shameful conspiracy of the Swedish judiciary against Assange.

Melzer, who speaks Swedish and has analysed the original documents of the Swedish judiciary, says the following about the rape accusations against Assange: “I couldn’t believe my eyes: according to the woman involved herself, there had never been a rape ... The statement of this woman was subsequently rewritten by the Stockholm police without her participation.”
What was striking, Melzer wrote, was the coincidence of these accusations with the publication of the so-called “Afghan War Diary,” one of the biggest leaks in the history of the US military, which WikiLeaks was able to publish in Der Spiegel, the Guardian and the New York Times in 2010.

On February 5, “Heute Journal,” the main news program of broadcaster ZDF, reported on the case for several minutes. The report, which noted, “Hacker, spy, suspected rapist—none of this is true,” was the first time such a thing had been reported on public television, and Nils Melzer was also reported on at length. “If you scratch the surface a bit,” he said, “the contradictions immediately come out.”

A full-page advert appeared in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung demanding Assange’s release. This was followed by the Süddeutsche Zeitung, broadcaster Deutschlandfunk, the Frankfurter Rundschau, Tagesspiegel, taz, etc. ... Many large newspapers and media bodies, which for years had helped to spread the absurd and publicly refuted accusations and slander about Assange, now reported critically on the case.

The long-time taz journalist Bettina Gaus even condescended to admit, “The public has been manipulated in the Assange case. Me too.” Self-critically she wrote, “I always found the Assange case unappetizing, and I was not very interested in it. I don’t like the man. I thought that somehow, everything will be correct. If I thought about it at all.” And, “Apparently, I wasn’t the only one.”

The change of course by the media and some politicians in the Assange case is undoubtedly due to massive pressure from public opinion. The slanders and accusations against the courageous journalist, orchestrated by state authorities and supported by right-wing feminist circles, never penetrated very deeply. And the mistrust grew with increasing militarism and the aggressive appearance of right-wing extremists supported by the establishment parties, as in the election of the Thuringia state premier with the votes of far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), Christian Democrats (CDU) and FDP.

Under these circumstances, the worldwide campaign of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the initiatives of local support groups in defence of Assange have had a great impact. The ICFI had already organized international meetings and rallies for Assange’s liberation before his arrest in London.

In a statement on June 20, 2019, the WSWS editorial board then called for a “worldwide campaign to prevent Julian Assange’s rendition to the US!”

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