

The show trial of Julian Assange begins

25 February 2020

The first day of the British court hearing yesterday to determine if WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange will be extradited to the United States left no doubt that what is taking place is a legal travesty that threatens both Assange's life and fundamental democratic rights.

The Trump administration's application to render Assange to the US should have been thrown out within minutes, due to British laws that deny the extradition of individuals to face politically motivated charges.

Assange has been charged with multiple counts of espionage over WikiLeaks' publication in 2010 and 2011 of leaked information that revealed US war crimes and diplomatic conspiracies. A more blatantly politically motivated case could not be imagined than a state seeking to prosecute those who exposed its criminality.

Instead of dismissing the case, however, Judge Vanessa Baraister accepted the assertion of James Lewis QC, representing the US Department of Justice, that "he [Assange] is not charged with disclosure of embarrassing or awkward information that the government would rather not have had disclosed."

This absurd and bald-faced lie is contradicted by the very indictment against Assange, which charges him with "having unauthorized possession of, access to, and control over documents relating to the national defense, willfully and unlawfully caused and attempted to cause such materials to be communicated, delivered, and transmitted to persons not entitled to receive them... by publishing them on the Internet."

That is, Assange is accused of having published documents the "government would rather not have had disclosed," documents that were "embarrassing" to the American government because it showed that its military forces had killed thousands of the civilians in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US case, foreshadowed in yesterday's opening statements, centres on the allegation that the names of American government and military informants and spies were not redacted from documents by WikiLeaks before they were published. US agencies, Lewis claimed, had

"identified hundreds of at-risk people" who were named in documents. It had "relocated" some, he asserted, while others had "subsequently disappeared." Assange, Lewis told the court, had "knowingly" put people at risk.

The same accusation was levelled against whistleblower Chelsea Manning and it was disproven and discredited during her military trial for passing the information over to WikiLeaks.

Brigadier General Robert Carr, the counter-intelligence officer who had overseen the investigation by the US Defense Department, admitted under oath in 2013 that "I don't have a specific example" of any person who came to harm as due to the publication of the leaks. Carr's initial naming of *one individual* who was allegedly killed as a result of Manning's actions was stricken from the official record of the trial because the person had not even been identified in the documents.

Yesterday, in the British court, Lewis likewise admitted that the "US cannot prove disappearance caused by the outing by WikiLeaks." Moreover, Edward Fitzgerald QC, representing Assange, pointed out: "WikiLeaks only published the unredacted material after they had been published by others."

The extradition hearing is nevertheless proceeding on the false assertion that Assange committed a crime. In fact, he did what genuine journalists and publishers have always prided themselves for doing: he made available the evidence of criminality that those in power in Washington and elsewhere were seeking to conceal from the people. His actions as a publisher have historically been protected under the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

The legal travesty taking place in London—and the one being prepared in the US—cannot hide from the world's population that Assange has been relentlessly pursued because he oversaw a damning exposure of the US government and the reality of imperialist wars and diplomacy.

Chelsea Manning was arrested, abused, tortured and condemned to 35 years imprisonment and spent seven

years in a cell before her sentence was commuted in 2017. WikiLeaks was censored on the Internet and Assange was slandered with false allegations of sexual assault. He was forced to wage a protracted fight in the British courts to try and prevent his extradition to Sweden. He was forced to seek asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London because British courts ignored the evidence that the Swedish case was a tissue of lies and the Australian government, which had the responsibility to protect Assange as one of its citizens, refused to intervene.

While in the embassy from June 2012 to April 2019, Assange was denied access to adequate medical care by the British government and even the ability to access direct sunlight. He endured what medical experts have classified as relentless physical mistreatment and “psychological torture.” As has now been thoroughly documented, UC Global, the security company supposedly protecting him and the embassy, was in fact spying on him on behalf of the US government. It recorded and handed over to the CIA his most intimate discussions, including those with his legal representatives.

In contravention of international law, the Trump administration threatened and bribed the Ecuadorian government into reneging on its provision of asylum. Assange was dragged away by police and has since been incarcerated in brutal conditions in the maximum security Belmarsh Prison awaiting the beginning of the extradition hearing. Manning has been reimprisoned for refusing to testify to a grand jury against Assange.

The case for the British government and courts to reject the US attempt to get its hands on the publisher of WikiLeaks is overwhelming and interconvertible. As is the case for the Australian government to intervene with the full weight of its diplomatic and legal powers demanding an end to the brutal vendetta against an Australian citizen and journalist.

The actions of the American state can be compared with those of a murderer who escapes justice but hunts down the people who provided evidence against them. Not a single politician, military officer or diplomatic official has ever been held to account for the mass murders and anti-democratic conspiracies revealed in the documents leaked by Manning and published by WikiLeaks. Instead, it is Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning who are in prison cells, and Assange facing the prospect of a life sentence of up to 175 years in the darkest corner of the US federal prison system.

Millions of people around the world, and dozens of organisations, are today raising their voices in defence of

Assange and Manning. A powerful international movement is taking shape. But it must assimilate and base itself upon the lesson of the great past struggles to free class war prisoners and victims of state frame-up. Only fear of a mass political mobilisation of the working class will compel their persecutors to release them.

The freedom of Assange and Manning will not be won by appealing to the non-existent democratic and moral principles of political leaders such as Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Labour leadership in the UK, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor leader Anthony Albanese in Australia, let alone Trump or the Democratic Party establishment in the US that are determined to destroy WikiLeaks.

Rather, the defence of Assange must be based upon the growing struggles of the working class. All over the world, workers are engaged in a mounting wave of strikes and political protest and it is this social force that will free Assange and all other class war prisoners.

Workers must understand that the defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle for social equality. As a speaker at a Socialist Equality Party rally in defence of Assange in Sydney, Australia said on February 22: “We won’t have a voice on any issue if we do not have honest information and freedom of speech.”

The developing movement to defend Assange must direct its energy to mobilising the even greater movement that is underway in the working class against social inequality, the threat of fascism and dictatorship and the growing danger of war. The immense power of the working class is the force that can end the legal charade taking place in London and secure Assange’s immediate and unconditional freedom.

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