

The working class must demand an end to the show trial of Julian Assange

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The first day of Julian Assange's resumed extradition hearing, held in London's Old Bailey, saw a country that boasts of being one of the oldest democracies in the world sink to the level of a tinpot dictatorship.

Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, has exposed war crimes, torture, state surveillance and the diplomatic conspiracies of the US and other imperialist powers. But he was delivered to the court from his cell in a maximum-security prison in an unmarked van, after being imprisoned in conditions worse than those accused of murder. In the cells under the Old Bailey, he was able to see his lawyers in person for the first time in six months and given his first look at the final written submissions in his own case.

Outside, his colleague, WikiLeaks Editor-in-Chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, was denied access to the court, along with veteran investigative journalist John Pilger. Earlier that morning, 40 trial monitors, including representatives of Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders, and EU parliamentarians, had their remote access to the hearing withdrawn by District Judge Vanessa Baraitser. As justification, she referred in Orwellian terms to the need to protect "the integrity of the court."

An Amnesty International spokesperson said, "We conduct trial monitoring all over the world, week in, week out and indeed are recognised all over the world as an accredited fair trial observer. We were first denied physical access to the court when we applied back in August. We were then granted six remote online observer places, which were reduced just a couple of days ago to one. And now we've found out this morning even that one place has been refused."

Amnesty only issued a statement opposing Assange's treatment on February 21 this year, having come under substantial popular pressure. But the UK is now running such a naked show trial that even its online access to proceedings in the Old Bailey cannot be tolerated.

Throughout the Assange case, the UK judiciary has

served two functions. To rubber-stamp the US government's every abuse of Assange's legal and democratic rights, and to prevent as much evidence as possible of that abuse from reaching the public eye.

District Judge Baraitser dutifully performed both tasks during yesterday's proceedings. Her first ruling was to slash the defence's suggested timings for questioning their own witnesses—a "time honoured approach in extradition proceedings," in the words of defence lawyer Edward Fitzgerald QC—to just half an hour per witness, meaning the majority of the contents of their submitted written statements will go unreported.

Baraitser's second ruling denied the defence's application for new allegations against Assange, introduced by the US government at the eleventh hour in a new "superseding" extradition request, to be excised from proceedings.

The new request was issued on August 12, just weeks before the current hearing was due to resume. Based on highly compromised sources, it significantly expanded the scope of activities the US government is seeking to criminalise and shifted the axis of the case away from Assange's journalistic and publishing work with brave whistleblower Chelsea Manning towards branding him as a hacker who endangered US national security.

Assange's legal team initially accepted the US government's word that the additional allegations would not constitute "charged conduct in their own right," but merely "background narrative." Wanting to end their client's harmful detention as soon as possible, they agreed to proceed with the new request in the hearing scheduled for September.

As soon as they informed the court of this decision, the US government issued a revised Opening Note to the new extradition request stating: "Contrary to the submission of the defence ... the addendum particulars in the Second Superseding Indictment are not mere narrative ... These particulars constitute the conduct upon which this court is

entitled, and indeed must now, determine that an extradition offence is made out...”

Fitzgerald noted, “It is now being said that even if the court rejects the charges against him, [Assange can be extradited] on the basis of the new material alone.” Mark Summers QC, also speaking for Assange, called this a “fundamental unfairness ... visited on the defence” who have had no time to formulate a response to the new alleged conduct and are already long past their deadline for submitting evidence.

Baraitser signed off on outrageous piece of lawfare without a moment’s hesitation, saying the defence could have remedied any problem by seeking an adjournment, ignoring the fact that Assange had no opportunity to review the revised Opening Note and provide new instructions.

Her decision means that, since Assange was dragged out of the Ecuadorian Embassy in April last year, the case against him has grown from an initial count of computer hacking with a maximum five-year sentence, to 18 counts under the Espionage Act with a potential sentence of 175 years in a federal prison (mainly in connection with publishing files received from Manning), and now to the same charges of espionage but on the basis of wide array of allegations including involvement with various hacking groups, providing aid to whistleblower Edward Snowden, and his calling for transparency of information.

Baraitser refused a subsequent request made by Summers, after a brief consultation with Assange, to adjourn the hearing until January.

The arbitrary and legally abusive persecution of Assange exemplifies the deepening turn to authoritarian and fascistic methods of rule by governments across the world. In the weeks leading up to Assange’s hearing, rights enshrined in the US constitution has been torn apart as demonstrators opposing police violence and murder in cities across America have been met with rubber bullets, tear gas and baton charges. In scenes reminiscent of South American dictatorships, federal agents have bundled US citizens into unmarked cars to be taken away for questioning and protesters have been shot and killed by US police and fascist vigilantes.

Assange’s case is the spearhead of this offensive. Through it, the US and British ruling class are making clear they do not care one iota about democratic rights or legal precedent. They are seeking to establish new precedents on the naked class principle that those acting against the interests of the capitalist state should expect brutal repression.

Political responsibility for this pseudo-legal travesty lies with the supposedly liberal media, the Democrats in the US, Britain’s Labour Party and their pseudo-left hangers-on. It is they who have been responsible for demobilising and suppressing the massive popular sympathy that exists for Assange in the working class and giving free rein to the Trump administration and the Johnson government.

Having supported the disgraceful slander of Assange as a “rapist,” based on state-manufactured sexual assault smears, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the Democratic Socialists of America, Britain’s Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and similar formations the world over, demanded that Assange should be extradited to Sweden—which would only ever be a staging post towards extradition to the US.

After the secret Grand Jury, prepared against Assange under Barack Obama, was exposed, and the Trump administration sought Assange’s extradition, the liberal press cheered his seizure from the Ecuadorian embassy and then wrote of Trump’s “leniency” for seeking his arrest only on a five-year sentence hacking charge.

When the charges were expanded under the Espionage Act, they and the few pseudo-left backers of the Don’t Extradite Assange campaign called for faith to be placed in the British justice system and appeals to “left” politicians like Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. The anti-democratic stench of yesterday’s court hearing was the rotten fruit of this campaign.

Workers and young people must be warned: Decisive political issues are being fought out at the Old Bailey. The battle lines of this fight are not drawn across the courtroom, but across society.

No twist in this legal farce will change the fact that Assange is in the dock because he revealed imperialist crimes against the international working class. In prosecuting him, the ruling class are affirming their right to carry out even more terrible atrocities in the future. This must be opposed. The only force capable of doing so is a unified movement of workers across the world.

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