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What took them so long? New York Times, Guardian finally call for Assange's freedom

Ten years after Wikileaks publisher Julian Assange was forced to seek refuge at the Ecuadorian embassy in London and three years after he was arrested and subjected to solitary confinement, the editors and publishers of the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *El País* and *Der Spiegel* have issued an open letter calling on US President Joe Biden to end Assange's prosecution.

At long last, these publications have acknowledged that the material published by Assange was of vital public interest and importance, noting that what he released “disclosed corruption, diplomatic scandals and spy affairs on an international scale” and “decisions that cost the country most heavily in lives and money.”

Even now, they write, “journalists and historians continue to publish new revelations, using the unique trove of documents.”

The letter stated, “On April 12th 2019, Assange was arrested in London on a US arrest warrant, and has now been held for three and a half years in a high-security British prison usually used for terrorists and members of organised crime groups. He faces extradition to the US and a sentence of up to 175 years in an American maximum-security prison.”

The authors oppose the use against Assange of “an old law, the Espionage Act of 1917 (designed to prosecute potential spies during World War One), which has never been used to prosecute a publisher or broadcaster.”

The letter concludes that this “sets a dangerous precedent, and threatens to undermine America's First Amendment and the freedom of the press. Obtaining and disclosing sensitive information when necessary in the public interest is a core part of the daily work

of journalists. If that work is criminalised, our public discourse and our democracies are made significantly weaker ... it is time for the US government to end its prosecution of Julian Assange for publishing secrets.”

The open letter makes clear that Assange has been the victim of a monstrous campaign of state persecution, costing him years of his life and good health, for revealing state criminality, designed to set a chilling example for others.

But this raises the question: What took so long? Why did it take 10 years for the *New York Times* and *Guardian* to call for Assange’s prosecution to end?

The conduct of these newspapers over the past decade has been thoroughly reprehensible. Their efforts to poison public opinion against Assange, to give credence to the false claims and accusations made against him, facilitated the American state’s persecution of this principled and courageous journalist.

Britain’s *Guardian* was the first to work with WikiLeaks in the publication of the cables. It broke off relations within a month of their publication and quickly launched into a campaign of character assassination taken up across the world’s media, seeking to render Assange an international pariah.

Explaining its earlier collaboration with Wikileaks, the paper wrote in a December 2010 editorial, “WikiLeaks: the man and the idea,” that it had agreed to publish only “a small number of cables” and highlighted its painstaking “process of editing, contextualising, explanation and redaction.” It had acted, in other words, to control the fallout from the details of murder, torture, espionage and corruption contained in the documents.

This accomplished, the *Guardian* and other publications turned viciously on Assange, centering their attacks on a manufactured Swedish sexual assault investigation and extradition request—designed to blacken his name, secure his capture and prepare his onward extradition to the US.

The case has since been thoroughly exposed and abandoned, but it served to secure Assange’s seven-year-long effective arbitrary detention, forced to claim asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London while a police snatch squad waited outside. This period, during which Assange was spied on by US intelligence and was the object of its kidnap and assassination plots, is left out of the open letter.

All the while, attacks on Assange’s character continued. The *Guardian* went as far as making up a meeting between Assange and Donald Trump ally Paul Manafort—reported as an exclusive—as part of its campaign to implicate him in a supposed Russian government conspiracy to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election.

Even when the full scope of the US case against Assange was revealed in April 2019, the *Guardian's* first response was to again propose extradition to Sweden as a way of silencing him that did not raise difficulties with the use of the Espionage Act.

The letter makes clear that, from the beginning, the editors and publishers of these newspapers understood that Assange was functioning as a journalist, innocent of any crime.

If the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, et. al., in a major about-face, now explicitly oppose the persecution of Assange, it is out of concern that a show trial of a journalist who exposed US war crimes will spark a major political crisis for the Biden administration.

Any trial of Assange would confront massive popular opposition and would shed further light on the crimes committed by US imperialism, including under the Democratic administration of Barack Obama, in which Biden served as vice president.

This exposure of US war crimes would come at a time when the United States is expanding its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, sold to the public on the grounds that US intervention is necessary to prevent Russian atrocities.

Moreover, any trial would shed light on the reprehensible role of the *New York Times* and *Guardian* in facilitating the persecution of Assange.

The working class must redouble its fight to force Assange's freedom. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the US government was seeking "to create the conditions for the prosecution of journalists, publishers and activists everywhere," but also that Assange was "the victim of a monstrous criminal conspiracy, involving the most powerful governments in the world, the intelligence agencies and their mouthpieces in the corporate media."

The movement in Assange's defence must be based on the international working class, a force more powerful than all of the governments, intelligence agencies and corporations combined, which must make his defence the focal point for a counteroffensive against militarism and all attacks on democratic and social rights. As the NATO-Russia war continues—with the enthusiastic support of the *New York Times*, *Guardian* and the rest—this struggle is more important than ever.

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