

The Global War on Journalism

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Australian Federal Police officers raided two separate news offices within 24 hours this week, in a chilling and blatant attack on the freedom of the press, aimed at intimidating journalists who report on government misconduct and war crimes.

On Wednesday, police spent more than eight hours trawling through nearly 10,000 files, including journalists' notes, draft versions of stories, raw footage, meeting minutes and emails, at the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. A day earlier, police spent hours ransacking the home of a News Corp political editor, Annika Smethurst.

In both cases, the raids were triggered by the publication of leaks exposing key elements of Australia's US-linked military-intelligence apparatus—war crimes committed by the Australian special forces in Afghanistan and plans to legalise internal mass surveillance by Australia's electronic spy agency.

The raids have graphically confirmed the warnings issued by the *World Socialist Web Site*: the persecution and jailing of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is setting a precedent for the criminalisation of journalism.

By targeting journalists, as well as the individuals leaking the damning information, the Australian government is directly following the lead of the Trump administration's charging of Assange, a journalist and publisher, with 17 counts under the US Espionage Act, for which he faces life imprisonment and possibly the death penalty.

"The arrest and prosecution of our publisher at the behest of the Trump administration is a watershed for the rest of the media—from seeking to prosecute whistleblowers, law enforcement is now being used to silence those who hold government to account," WikiLeaks wrote on Twitter. "We have long warned that other prosecutions will follow."

What is taking place in Australia is not the only verification of these warnings. In France, the government of Emmanuel Macron is moving to prosecute journalists from *Disclose*, who have exposed, in partnership with the *Intercept*, *Radio France*, *Mediapart*, *Arte Info* and *Konbini*, France's complicity in Saudi Arabia's illegal war in Yemen and the Macron government's efforts to cover it up.

In the US itself, now that Assange is behind bars, through a conspiracy between the governments of Australia, Britain, the US and Ecuador, whistleblower Chelsea Manning has been re-imprisoned, indefinitely. She has refused to testify at a grand jury established to concoct evidence and bring further frame-up charges against the WikiLeaks publisher.

The only supposed “crime” committed by Assange and Manning has been to reveal to the people of the world the war crimes, spying, regime-change operations and mass murder carried out by the US and its allies, including Australia.

WikiLeaks continued,

“Like the WikiLeaks publications that Julian Assange is being persecuted for in the United States, the articles in question contained not only information detailing the overreach of intelligence agencies, but also evidence of war crimes including torture and unlawful killings which have so far been kept from the public.”

In fact, it is inconceivable that the Australian government would have instigated and pursued the investigation of the ABC and Murdoch media journalists without the agreement, if not urging, of Washington. Both the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) surveillance agency are closely integrated into all the wars and war preparations of the US.



Thousands of internal ABC emails being gone through by the AFP [source: Twitter @TheLyonsDen]

The war crimes of the SAS—which include the killing of children and unarmed civilians, and the desecration of corpses—are an inseparable and inevitable aspect of the ongoing US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The ASD is part of the US-led global “Five Eyes” surveillance network. As Edward Snowden’s leaks in 2013 revealed, the ASD collaborates with the US National Security Agency in exchanging information, including on Australian citizens. The Australian government’s proposed changes in 2018, exposed by the leaks to Smethurst, would have legalised these spying operations.

The timing of the Australian raids is not accidental. Although the alleged leaks occurred in 2017 and 2018, the search warrants were executed just after Australia’s May 18 election,

which saw the return of the Liberal-National Coalition, and within weeks of the April 11 arrest of Assange.

In both cases, too, the precedent set by the Assange witch-hunt is being exploited to target journalists. The police are investigating alleged offences under section 79 of the Crimes Act. Dating back to World War I, this legislation outlaws not just “communicating,” but also “receiving,” information that “prejudices the security or defence” of Australia. If convicted, journalists could be jailed for up to seven years.

As the WSWS has warned, these developments are directly related to covering up, not just the past crimes of the US and its allies, but the even greater ones now being prepared as Washington threatens Iran, Syria and Venezuela, and escalates its economic war and military confrontation with China.

Successive Australian governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have made Australia a testing ground for the militarisation of society and the suppression of political dissent. This has included basing US Marines in the strategic northern city of Darwin and imposing legislation permitting the police and intelligence agencies to access online “metadata,” crack open encryption systems and prosecute anyone accused of “foreign interference.”

Throughout all the corporate media coverage of the Australian raids, there has been not one mention of Assange and Manning. None of the journalists voicing, legitimately, alarm at the chilling impact on freedom of speech, has referred to the obvious connection.

The global crackdown on the freedom of the press after the charging of Assange throws into relief the utterly pernicious role of all those who have played a role in the persecution of the WikiLeaks founder.

The list is long. Nearly every major news outlet—including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Guardian*—has taken part in a conspiracy to calumniate and defame Assange. Middle-class pseudo-left organisations such as the Democratic Socialists of America and the now-defunct International Socialist Organization have issued statements supporting Sweden’s vindictive persecution of Assange at the behest of the United States.

It is no surprise then, that neither the *Times*, the *Post*, nor the *Guardian* have issued a statement condemning the raids in Australia, while *Jacobin*, associated with the DSA, has not even bothered to report them.

The defence of the freedom of the press will not come from these quarters.

The global crackdown on the freedom of speech is targeted squarely at the working class: against its right to know the crimes and conspiracies of the ruling elites and the state apparatuses they control.

A free press and freedom of expression online are vital for the working class to organise the struggle against war, inequality, and all the other social scourges of capitalism. As they enter into struggles all over the world, workers must take up the demand to free Assange and Manning, and to oppose the prosecution of all journalists.

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Featured image: Australia's Federal Police, top, enter the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the national public broadcaster, during a raid on their offices in Sydney, Australia. (Credit: Australian Broadcasting Corporation)

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