Australian protests to defend Julian Assange and WikiLeaks

Our reporters
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Several thousand people demonstrated yesterday in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne—Australia's largest east coast cities—in defence of WikiLeaks and its jailed founder Julian Assange. The protestors, many of them students and young workers, carried placards supporting Assange and calling for his release. Others angrily denounced Prime Minister Julia Gillard who has publicly declared that WikiLeaks' publication of US diplomatic cables was "illegal".

Although the protests were called at short notice, about 400 people rallied in Brisbane outside the Department of Foreign Affairs and then marched through the CDB. In Sydney an estimated 1,200 demonstrated outside the town hall in the early afternoon and in Melbourne about 1,000 people heard speakers outside the State Library before marching through the city and blocking peak-hour traffic.

The rallies were addressed by a variety of speakers—Greens MPs, former Independent MP Phil Cleary, representatives of the online lobby group GetUp!, Assange's Australian lawyer Rob Stary and others—who denounced the US government attempts to shut down WikiLeaks and persecute Assange.

WL Central web site moderator Asher Wolf, which hosts WikiLeaks material, told Sydney protestors that her site was receiving 1.9 million hits per day. She said calls by US politicians for Assange and WikiLeaks to be defined as "terrorists" represented a "death threat" against the Australian citizen and her colleagues.

Pirate Party representative Simon Fru said WikiLeaks was "vital in the modern world" because traditional media organisations had largely abandoned real government exposures. "We are being systematically lied to about the conduct of government affairs," he said.

Keith Dodd, an American citizen who owns an IT company, told the rally that the US government was "the biggest enemy of democratic rights in the world today" and "tramples on its own constitution every day". Hundreds of thousands of innocent Afghan and Iraqi men, he said, were being "slaughtered by the American government without the blink of an eye". "Coming up in the list of the ignoble," he added, "are the Australian politicians, both Liberal and Labor, who do the bidding of the US government."

The majority of speakers, and the Greens in particular, promoted the illusion that protests to the Obama administration and Gillard Labor government would compel them to end the persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks.

In Melbourne, Greens MP Adam Bandt denounced right-wing US politicians, such as Sarah Palin and Mike Huckabee, for encouraging violent attacks on Assange**,** saying they were the ones should be "investigated". He expressed his disappointment in the Australian government for its treatment of an Australian citizen, but of course has no intention of withdrawing his support for it. The minority Gillard government rests on an agreement with the Greens, and the vote of Bandt in particular along with three independents in the lower house of the federal parliament.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to a number of people at the Melbourne and Sydney protests who were angry over the attacks on Assange, WikiLeaks and democratic rights.

In Sydney, Melissa Yu, a 21-year-old student, commented: "George Orwell said, 'In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.' And we do live in a time of universal deceit. We've been lied to about so many things across the years—from Australia to the US to Iran to Israel—and we're fed up.

"We've been fighting the Israeli occupation and the Iraqi occupation but nobody listens, and WikiLeaks has come out to tell the truth, straight from US diplomatic cables."

Fergus Graton, 24 and unemployed, said: "I'm worried about three different things. First the oppression of free speech by Western governments; secondly, the witch-hunt of Julian Assange and comments of assassination and murder and the attempts to shut down WikiLeaks itself; and thirdly the Australian government's lack of care for its own citizens, which has been repeated throughout recent years. These should be major concerns for all."

Paul Toms, 36, a pool plumber, said: "I'm here because we've

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witnessed a couple of wars that we shouldn't have gone into and many atrocities have occurred. The likes of George Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard have more than blood on their hands. They should go down in history as having an effect on the world just like Hitler did.

Toms said he was "very sceptical of governments" and concerned about US government manipulation of politics internationally. Commenting on the WikiLeaks revelations about Labor minister Mark Arbib's secret contacts with the US embassy, he said: "Arbib has been shown to have given information to the American government, which obviously would be an espionage charge or treason under any government that had any notion of their own people. Even in a country like Australia, which is considered an ally of the US, America stepped in and manipulated our politics and most people aren't even aware of this."

Mamdouh Habib, who was rendered to Egypt by the US military in 2001, where he was tortured, and then incarcerated in Guantánamo Bay until 2005, said Assange could face the same illegal treatment that he endured. The difference, he said, was that "many know about his situation today and so if they arrest him, people will know what's going on. Nobody knew what happened to me and people used to believe the government when they claimed that I was a terrorist. What's going on now is very clear so the public will understand that our government is corrupt."

Habib warned: "The government can abandon anybody. It's not just this guy or me but anyone. That's why people have to wake up to understand we are in a war with the leaders. These leaders want to be in complete control; to make you a slave, not a human being at all."

Lee, a computer programmer, said the allegations against Assange were "trumped up" and aimed at extraditing him to the US. WikiLeaks, he said, "publicises the truth and what's really going on behind closed doors. This can only be a good thing. There's a lot we are being kept in the dark about, in terms of our involvement in Afghanistan, in particular. Anything that comes out of this that actually reveals the truth about the situation is a good thing."

Muyaku, from the Chagos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, where the US has a naval base and weapons stockpiles, said: "I've come here today to thank Julian Assange for putting his life on line for us to gather all the information we are gathering now." Referring to the US naval base on the Chagos Islands, he said: "I think the Indian Ocean is a peace zone and what they did is illegal. They are not allowed to stockpile weapons over there, especially weapons that are not agreed by all the people in this region."

In Melbourne, Sankalp Wadiwa, an Indian engineering student at the University of Ballarat, told the WSWS: "WikiLeaks is important because we now have some hint about what's really going on in the world. The US government is using its power and military forces against poor countries for their resources.

"Everything is behind a mask, but this mask is falling because of WikiLeaks and we can see the real face of the government. People who believe that their government is superior to others are easily led to hurt each other. This means we have to unite, otherwise we will have World War III. This is a really big issue."

Secondary school students Jack Long and James Stafrace spoke with WSWS reporters. James said: "It's not just about the US, it's also the corporations. I was amazed to read about Shell Oil in Nigeria and their role in toppling one government and installing another to support their interests. It shows you how deeply involved the corporations are in every country around the world."

Jack said: "I hope Assange isn't extradited to America. That's one of my biggest fears. He's doing a service to all of humanity, and I'm worried about what could happen. I was really surprised with the revelations about the coup against Rudd and how he was less aligned with the US than Gillard. The Iraq war revelations shocked me the most. Some 15,000 people killed, just at the checkpoints, the loss of innocent lives—I just don't see how the war can be justified.

"There should be no compromises on democracy and no more secrecy on the role of all governments, in particular the US. If you censor one thing, it gives the governments the excuse to censor what they like. WikiLeaks is scientific journalism, backed up with evidence. This is the way real journalism should work, completely transparent and published for all of humanity to read. Transparency is a good thing and raises the issue of accountability of all governments. Even if WikiLeaks is shut down, there will be other sites put up to continue the work. It's already opened up the flood gates."

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