

Police attack Australian protests in defense of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange

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A 600-strong demonstration in defence of WikiLeaks and its editor Julian Assange in central Sydney last night was assaulted by police, who tried to prevent protestors marching from the town hall to the US consulate 1,500 metres away.

The rally, which began at the town hall, heard various speakers, including journalist and author Antony Lowenstein, Pirate Party representatives and the Greens.

Lowenstein told demonstrators that WikiLeaks had revealed that the Australian authorities regarded the Afghanistan war as a disaster, but Prime Minister Julia Gillard had committed Australian troops for “at least another decade.” This episode, he said, highlighted the complicity of the media, and asked: “At what point does our media stop repeating press releases as news?”

New South Wales police had initially given permission for the march but then reversed their position, telling organisers they had not been given enough notice and had insufficient resources to cover it. The falsity of these claims was exposed by the massive police presence, which involved about 70 officers, including the heavily-armed riot squad, mounted police, dogs and a helicopter.

After protestors voted to go ahead with the march they were blocked by riot police and mounted officers. They were then herded onto the footpath, encircled, and constantly stopped for no apparent reason.

As they turned a corner towards the US consulate, the demonstrators were blocked by police, who tore away banners supporting WikiLeaks and pushed journalists covering the march. Somewhere between four and seven people were arrested, while police dogs were provocatively paraded in an attempt to intimidate the marchers. According to media reports, one man has since been charged with assaulting police.

In Melbourne, a 1,000-strong rally was also held, outside the state library. The demonstrators then marched to the British consulate, where they were also confronted by mounted police.

The disproportionate and aggressive police response to these relatively small demonstrations are yet another indication of the increasing use of police state-style measures to suppress and intimidate any section of the working class defending its democratic rights.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to several Sydney protestors. Lyal, a 21 year-old student, said: “I’m here to express my support for WikiLeaks and the right to free speech for every citizen. Assange is no different in my mind to any other journalist who releases a leak of public information. To persecute him individually is ludicrous. Catholic priests accused of paedophilia can travel the world, but Assange, a day after his organisation releases documents against US interests, immediately has an arrest warrant out for him, and an international arrest warrant at that. I find that ridiculous.

“It is unnerving that there seems to be collusion between government ministers and the US and that information not privy to the Australian public and relevant to the Australian public, is given to the US. The US should have no business in how our politics is conducted.”

Twee, who will be studying politics and journalism, next year said: “I’m here because I feel an encroaching sense of a totalitarian government... Our governments are supposed to be representatives of the people—we elect them. Why is this stuff not transparent and open to the general public?

“According to my sense of social justice, no one should be persecuted because they’re interested, not in furthering their own gains, but in exposing the truth.

There's obviously an injustice here and it's not on his [Assange's] part.”

Jessie, a student, commented: “Even though our governments say they're for transparent and open government—Obama even said technology is used to open up diplomacy—they're still cracking down with the police. They claim that WikiLeaks is doing something illegal, but haven't said what's illegal. America says that Assange has blood on his hands, but he has video showing that it is America that has killed innocent civilians.”

Lewis, a 20 year-old student, said: “If the police had just given us half an hour to march, all this fiasco and the arrests could have been avoided. I hope no one was hurt, but if anyone was, that could have been avoided as well. This says a lot about what our democracy is about. All this money has been spent on [visiting US talk-show host] Oprah and yet we can't even walk down the road.”



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