Australian vigils held in defence of Julian Assange

Our reporters
20 June 2018

Vigils in defence of Julian Assange were held yesterday in major Australian cities. They were part of an international series, marking six years since the WikiLeaks editor was forced to seek asylum in Ecuador's London embassy.

The demonstrations occurred under conditions of a stepped-up campaign by the British and US authorities to force Assange into their custody and prosecute him for exposing the war crimes and diplomatic intrigues of the imperialist powers.

They followed Sunday's rally in Sydney, organised by the Socialist Equality Party, to demand that the Australian government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull take immediate action to secure Assange's release and return to Australia, with a guarantee that he will not be extradited to the US.

Hundreds of workers and youth attended the rally, which was addressed by SEP national secretary James Cogan, the world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger, and other defenders of WikiLeaks.

Yesterday's vigils, like Sunday's demonstration, were subjected to a blackout by the Australian press. Despite the political and media establishment's calculated silence, around 80 people attended a lively lunchtime vigil outside the British consulate in Melbourne, organised by activist Davey Heller. John Shipton, Assange's father and a prominent campaigner for his son's freedom, attended the event.

Cogan, who spoke at the event, referenced the statements of Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's lawyers, to the UN Human Rights Council the day before. Cogan cited Robinson's warning that UK authorities were "showing deliberate disregard" for Assange's medical needs, and her demand that they end his "deprivation of liberty, respect his physical integrity and freedom of movement, and afford him the right to compensation."

The SEP national secretary indicted successive Australian governments for their central role in the persecution of Assange. He outlined the actions of the Labor government of Julia Gillard, which in 2010–11 branded WikiLeaks' activities as "illegal," and pledged full support for the US persecution of Assange.

Cogan stated: "Labor, no less than Obama's administration, was hostile to the existence of a media organisation that was fearlessly prepared to publish leaked information that exposed the military and diplomatic conspiracies and intrigues of the ruling elite, and the underlying criminal and predatory nature of the US-Australia military alliance."

Cogan reviewed the ongoing attacks on Assange by Turnbull's Coalition government, and concluded by stressing that the defence of Assange and all democratic rights required the mobilisation of the working class "independently of, and in opposition to, all factions of the establishment."

Shirley Shackleton, the 86-year-old widow of Greg Shackleton, a journalist among the "Balibo Five" who were killed by Indonesian authorities in East Timor in 1975, also spoke.

"Our politicians tell whopping great lies, I've been the recipient of amazing lies," Shackleton said. "As far as Julian Assange, the Australian government has shown they just don't care." She noted the erosion of civil liberties under successive governments, and warned: "I don't think we have democracy."

Greg Barnes, a well-known political advisor and media commentator, addressed the vigil. He stated that it was "to the credit of the Australian government that it has not joined" the attacks on Assange. This claim, however, is belied by the entire record of the Turnbull government, which has done nothing to assist Assange and has tacitly supported his persecution.

A second Melbourne vigil, organised by the protest group "Disarm" yesterday evening, was attended by

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around 30 people. It included the projection of the video *Collateral Murder* onto the face of the state library. The video, published by WikiLeaks in 2010, shows footage from a US Apache helicopter of the killing of unarmed Iraqis, including journalists, by American troops.

Small demonstrations were also held in Brisbane, Adelaide and Sydney.

Reporters for the WSWS spoke to participants at the Melbourne vigils.

Tessa, a University of Melbourne arts student who attended the lunchtime vigil, stated: "Julian Assange represents our cultural right to criticism. That is not something that the ruling class wants—freedom of speech and freedom of thought. Australia is just too close to the US to be able to challenge what they are doing. It is frustrating."

Tessa had watched the Facebook livestream video of Sunday's Sydney protest. It was "was very powerful and very relevant to myself as a student," she said.

"In particular Sue Phillips spoke about the cuts to education. The thinning down of the selection of texts at universities is preparing us for future militarisation. They are not presenting us with an alternative. When you have arms manufacturers like Lockheed Martin and BAE systems associated with the University of Melbourne, what sort of research is going to be funded?"

Felix, a 19-year-old TAFE student attended the evening vigil. He commented: "What's happened is an injustice. The government should actually stand up for a citizen of Australia from the threat of extradition to the United States of America.

"The impact of WikiLeaks has been awesome, so many things have changed, including the course of American politics. I was four years old when the Iraq War started. There never has been a time that I know of that has been without war and violence—everyone has now grown up with that."

Felix warned of the anti-democratic implications of the attack on Assange: "Anyone could set up a website and then any government could say, 'Hey this isn't alright, we want to extradite you, take you to court'."

Adam, an administrative worker, said: "I came here tonight to show my solidarity with Julian Assange, who is an important promoter of freedom of information in the world, and to say that what the government has done to silence him is completely outrageous.

"I think that it is absolutely appalling that the government has done nothing. It is an indicator of how far the established state has moved and how we need to fight to get back the rights we have already lost. The silence of the media, in not highlighting Assange's situation, is another example of this shift. The media has completely sold out. There seems to be an unspoken gag order, for the media to be silent."

Asia, a 24-year-old journalism graduate, stated: "Assange has always been a big part of the fight for social justice. When I watched the Australian film *Underground: The Julian Assange Story*, I saw how he was just a really intelligent kid, good at using the Internet, but that he wanted to use his abilities to expose nefarious government activities.

"Governments are fearful that he will publish more information that they don't want people to know about. It's so bad. It's the right to freedom of speech and journalism. It makes people like me scared to do hard reporting, because we could get locked up. It's really scary. Julian is such an important voice and that's obviously why they're so afraid of him—but it's just not fair."

Walter, who works in insurance, said: "I've been following WikiLeaks since it started. Here is this knockabout bloke who is a bit left of centre who was caught up all of a sudden in a storm after he set up WikiLeaks. This was something meant to facilitate freedom of information and freedom of the press.

"I can't believe that our government hasn't done anything to defend him. There has been a lot of innuendo and fake news. Some people I speak with think that Assange is a bad guy, that he is with Russia. For me this is just ridiculous. It doesn't make any sense, but that is the narrative that's been rammed down everybody's throat, day in and day out."

"Because of WikiLeaks I know a lot of the things that go on day-to-day behind closed doors with governments that we aren't exposed to. I can understand why the powers-that-be don't like that. They have the autonomy and non-transparency to do pretty much what they want. If we don't have people like WikiLeaks and Julian Assange we have lost total control of what's happening out there."

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