

New Zealand rally demands freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporters
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A rally was held in New Zealand's capital, Wellington, yesterday to demand that the Australian government intervene to secure freedom for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, an Australian citizen. About 25 supporters of Assange, including workers, students and retired people, gathered at the Australian High Commission and marched from there to the nearby US Embassy and the British High Commission.

All three governments have colluded in the persecution of Assange following WikiLeaks' release in 2010 of secret documents, which exposed the war crimes and anti-democratic machinations of American imperialism and its allies.

Rallies and vigils in defence of Assange have been held in many countries, following the June 17 rally in Sydney organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia).

Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand), which is in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International, addressed the Wellington event outside the Australian High Commission. He explained that Assange was being held in conditions of isolation and confinement that a United Nations special rapporteur described as torture.

He denounced the Ecuadorian government of Lenin Moreno for cutting off Assange's internet and communications, and for attempting to negotiate to hand him over to the US.

"Assange has committed no crime," the speaker declared. "If he falls into American hands he will be thrown in jail and subjected to the same brutal treatment as Chelsea Manning, who spent almost seven years in prison for leaking the Iraq war documents including the *Collateral Murder* video showing the murder of civilians."

Peters explained that the persecution of Assange was part of a broader campaign by the US and governments internationally to censor oppositional voices and independent journalism on the Internet, and to block workers and young people from accessing the truth.

"This is happening because governments and corporations are terrified of the re-emergence of class struggle internationally, the growth of strikes, of anti-war sentiment and the sympathy for socialism, especially among young people," he explained.

He denounced New Zealand's political establishment, including the National Party, the current Labour Party-led government and its ally the Greens, which back New Zealand's alliance with the US and tacitly support the attacks on Assange and WikiLeaks.

Peters noted that "along with Edward Snowden, Julian Assange has played a major role in demonstrating how New Zealand's ruling elite works hand-in-hand with America's military and spy agencies."

US embassy cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010 revealed that Helen Clark's Labour government sent troops to Iraq in 2003 in order to safeguard a lucrative supply contract for dairy company Fonterra, New Zealand's largest exporter.

"This revealed to everyone the mercenary and profit-driven nature of New Zealand's involvement in this brutal war, which is still continuing and which has cost more than a million lives. As we speak, New Zealand troops remain in Iraq and Afghanistan and the military is being strengthened for future conflicts," Peters said.

He concluded by pointing to the "widespread sympathy and support for Assange in the working class, as shown in the international rallies... The working class must be mobilised to force the Australian, British, US and Ecuadorian governments to guarantee Assange's

freedom and his safety.”

Paul Bruce, former regional councillor and Green Party member, spoke briefly to the rally, saying WikiLeaks had exposed “illegal wars... and the deceit of Western governments,” including their backing of the Saudi regime and its murderous war in Yemen. He praised Assange as a “great Australian” and called on the Turnbull government to “bring Julian Assange home.”

The Green Party, however, is a vital prop for the Labour-led coalition government. The party has issued no official statement opposing Assange’s persecution and, moreover, supports New Zealand’s alliance with the US, including in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Members of the Socialist Equality Group spoke with some of those attending the rally.

Lynn, who travelled from Masterton, a two-hour drive, to be at the rally, described herself as a socialist. “I’m a strong supporter of Julian Assange. I think that what’s happening to him is a danger to his life,” she said.

Lynn denounced the mainstream media, saying: “WikiLeaks exposed the corruption. As John Pilger said, investigative journalists have to now rely on the alternative media. He’s not allowed in the *Guardian* anymore.”

She praised journalist Seymour Hersh’s exposure of the lies used by the Obama and Trump administrations to justify war in Syria and noted that Hersh had been unable to publish his articles in the US. “It’s amazing that people with such integrity just aren’t allowed to publish. There’s a war on dissent,” she said.

Dan, who has worked as a journalist and a musician, said he became interested in WikiLeaks after the release of the *Collateral Murder* video, which shows the murder of unarmed journalists.

Commenting on the media’s slander against Assange, he said: “That’s how the American government, FBI, CIA, have always done it. They did it with Gary Webb, who exposed the CIA dealing cocaine with the Contras [in Nicaragua], and he ended up with two bullets in his head.”

Jonathan, a postgraduate student at Victoria University of Wellington, also denounced the corporate media’s complicity in the assault on free speech, saying: “Julian Assange is a journalist and has been exposing truth. Have any documents released by

WikiLeaks been proved false? They’re all true.

“I think it’s important to highlight that it’s not just the crimes of America and the Western world that WikiLeaks revealed. Hundreds of thousands of documents were published on Russian, Indian and Chinese crimes.

“For the powerful, free speech is only okay if it’s used against our enemies,” he commented. “When it’s used to expose our crimes then we will persecute the people who do that to make an example. Julian Assange is on the eve of spending six years locked in a room because were he to leave he’d be arrested, almost certainly extradited to the US, and he’s been threatened with execution.”

During Assange’s confinement, “thanks to the internet and thanks to the previous Ecuadorian government, he still had a voice. Now that’s been shut down. I think it’s very important to show solidarity in this situation, that we won’t allow him to continue to be silenced. The demand has to be for his full freedoms to be respected and that must be retained for all journalists because truth is integral to democracy.”

Attend the Socialist Equality Group’s public meeting:

Free Julian Assange! End Internet censorship!

Sunday July 1 at 4:15pm

Russell Keown House, corner of Laings Road and Queens Drive

Lower Hutt



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