

Chelsea Manning speaks in New Zealand

Tom Peters**13 September 2018**

On September 8 and 9 whistleblower Chelsea Manning spoke to meetings attended by hundreds of people in Auckland and Wellington, New Zealand.

The Australian government denied entry to Manning, who had been scheduled to appear in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. She defied this attack on free speech and freedom of movement by addressing Australian audiences via live video link.

New Zealand's opposition National Party and sections of the media had demanded a similar ban. The Labour Party-led government, however, faced with widespread public support for Manning, allowed her to enter the country.

In 2010, Manning, then 22-years-old and a US army intelligence analyst, known as Bradley Manning, leaked hundreds of thousands of US military documents and embassy cables to WikiLeaks. This courageous action exposed war crimes carried out by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the murder of journalists and innocent civilians shown in the "Collateral Murder" video.

WSWS reporters attended the event in Wellington, where Manning began by talking about her difficult early life, including periods of homelessness as a teenager, followed by her decision to join the army. Her father had also been in the military.

Manning said she had not been anti-war before seeing the brutal reality of the US war in Iraq. After arriving there in late 2009 she explained, "I started to slowly realise, I'm not working with statistics. These are people's lives... I processed everything that was happening over time and I couldn't separate my job from the reality, I couldn't do that anymore... We couldn't keep doing what we were doing." Manning decided to leak the military documents in early 2010 while on leave in the US.

She described the brutal conditions she experienced while being detained in solitary confinement, including in "a cage" on a military base. "I had no sense of time... I was completely cut off from the outside world," she said. "I went two months without even knowing whether or not my family knew I was alive." Eventually, after being court-martialed, she was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

Manning's sentence was commuted by President Barack

Obama and she was released in 2017, but not pardoned. She has spent seven years, most of her adult life, in prison.

"A lot of people want to focus on what I went through, but in the US there's 2.2 million people in prison," she said. She explained that those behind bars supported and "stood up for each other" and "the most violent people in prison were the prison guards."

Asked if she felt she had got her life back after her unexpected release, Manning said she did not know. She pointed to the militarisation of every-day life in the US: "I have freedom of movement, that's different from being in prison. But we've got razor-wire walls on the border now, we have police running around our neighbourhoods with AR-15s [assault rifles].

"The reason I was so bothered by what we were doing in Iraq was that we were the occupying force," Manning continued. "I see that now, in the US, we're our own occupying force; we have a domestic military occupation, especially in the most vulnerable communities. Trans people are disproportionately affected by that, so are people of colour and immigrants."

Manning was interviewed for just over an hour by former Labour Party MP Georgina Beyer, the world's first openly transgender parliamentarian, before taking questions from the audience.

Beyer criticised the Australian government's decision to ban Manning from the country, saying "they suck up to the US." She then admitted that New Zealand was also part of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network.

In fact, Beyer herself was part of the 1999–2008 Labour government, which greatly strengthened New Zealand's military and intelligence relations with the US and sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. NZ's Special Air Service forces have been implicated in war crimes in Afghanistan.

The current Labour government of Jacinda Ardern has kept NZ forces in both countries and is further boosting military spending and collaboration with the US, including in the military build-up against China and North Korea.

At one point, Beyer said many people saw Manning as "a trans activist." Manning replied that, while she cared about issues facing transgender people, "I'm not a trans activist.

I'm just in solidarity with folks. I want to abolish ICE; I'm not an immigrant. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is a deportation taskforce that we have in the US, basically conducting ethnic cleansing. I'm an activist; I just happen to be trans."

Manning elaborated that "different groups of people are dealing with different problems that are coming from the same source: the same military, police and intelligence apparatus, this gigantic whirling death machine that we've built over several decades... So what we can do is be in solidarity with each other, even though we're affected in different ways."

The United States, she continued, "has the largest military in the world. We spend \$700 billion a year right now, up from only \$550 a couple of years ago" along with the largest prison system and intelligence apparatus.

Manning answered numerous questions from audience members, many of whom thanked her for coming to New Zealand and expressed appreciation for her courage.

A WikiLeaks supporter in the audience asked if Manning was able to "speak up for Julian Assange," who has spent six years confined inside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London to avoid extradition to the US and potential imprisonment, or worse, if found guilty of espionage.

Manning answered evasively: "I don't really know much about him or the case... I've heard so many things. And the things I do know about my own case, I can't talk about because the court-martial's classified. Even though I want to talk about stuff, I can't, and it places me in an uncomfortable box."

Following the publication of Manning's leaks, WikiLeaks has been labelled a "hostile" organisation by Democrats and Republicans in the US. Its founder, Assange, has been persecuted and there are plans to imprison him for the "crime" of revealing US war crimes and anti-democratic operations throughout the world. In March, Ecuador's government sought to appease Washington by cutting off Assange's internet access, isolating him from the outside world.

Another audience member noted that millions have died due to US-led wars in the Middle East since 2001, yet virtually nothing is said in the media about "the horrors in Yemen, what's happened in Raqqa [Syria], and Mosul [Iraq]."

Manning agreed that the population was kept in the dark: "You're not supposed to know about it. It's supposed to be so overwhelming and complex and unimaginable... that's why it's so hard to do activism against [war]."

Asked what she thought about the recent op-ed in the *New York Times* by an anonymous member of the "resistance" within the Trump administration, Manning replied: "It's all

a sideshow, in my opinion," adding that "most people in America" did not care about "the palace intrigue" and "half the things that are being debated on television."

"You see people worried about issues in their community, and it's stemming from the same systemic problem [as] 20 years ago." The Trump administration, she said, was the outcome of "systemic problems" in the US.

Asked to elaborate on her recent decision to contest the Democratic Party's primary campaign for the Maryland Senate seat, Manning said she wanted to use the campaign as a "platform... to talk about things that no other candidate in the entire Democratic Party was talking about or even suggesting. It was messy."

At one point she and her campaign team discussed whether they should "try to win" through focus groups and "figure out what people want to hear, or do we want to stick to our principles?" They made a unanimous decision to stick to "the platform that we believed in," including the abolition of ICE, rolling back prisons and stop arming the police with military weapons.

Manning explained that she would knock on peoples' doors and "they would tell me their life story" and posed hard questions to which "I didn't have answers, sometimes... I had really intense moments on people's doorsteps." Not knowing what to do, she said she often felt like hugging people. Following the campaign, Manning decided she could not see herself being a politician in the present system, but considered herself an activist.

Such comments reveal the basic fact that there is no way forward for the working class within the framework of the two-party system. The urgent need is for a socialist and internationalist political perspective to unite working people in the US and around the world.



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